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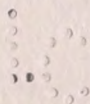


# AN INTERRUPTED HONEYMOON

*By*

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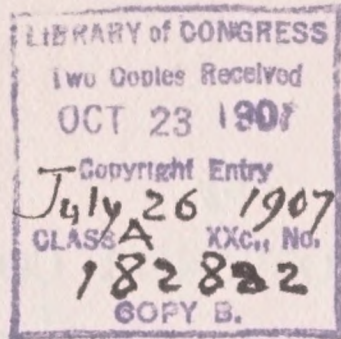
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# AN INTERRUPTED HONEYMOON

## CHAPTER I

### THE WEDDING EVE

THE old Haselton homestead in its pleasant setting of big square blossomy yard, had a delightfully festive and set-to-rights air this June afternoon. Joseph Haselton thought so as he looked critically over his domain. Then he decided that he could improve the trimming of the tall box borders between which the straight gravel path led from the gate to the front porch. He went around the house to the kitchen to get the pruning shears.

The kitchen was spacious and low-ceiled, abounding in shelves, and cupboards, and well-scoured deal tables; and all manner of old-fashioned and new fashioned appliances for homely cheer and comfort. It was an enjoyable room. A two-year-old boy strapped into a high chair, crowed and gurgled gleefully at sight of his father. Mrs. Haselton stood at a table frosting cakes with practised hands; and she smiled cheerfully at her husband as he threw himself on a chair near her with a pretense of exhaustion.

"Won't I be glad when all this darned fuss is over!" he said.



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She shook her pretty head at him in mock reproof and thorough understanding. "Joe, you shouldn't talk like that. You know you don't grudge Sally a bit of the trouble."

"Of course I don't, bless her. But a man's got to have his little grumble." With an elaborate pretense of absent-mindedness, Joseph helped himself to a crisp cake.

"Now, Joe, let my cake alone. It's for tomorrow." His wife shook her head at him. She watched his enjoyment in satisfaction. "How is it?" she asked anxiously.

"Bully," he told her, as he swallowed the last mouthful. "Where's Sally?"

"She's coming now." Mrs. Haselton nodded toward the door into the hall. They could hear quick light steps descending the stairs and in a moment Sarah Haselton joined her brother and sister. As she looked around the cosy old kitchen, such a characteristic part of the home where she had lived all her life, and which she was preparing now to leave, a play of uncertain emotion flitted over what was usually a very calm young countenance. She was very happy; life was beautiful and full of promise, yet to her own surprise, she felt tears not very far away. The merry baby beat a tattoo of welcome on the table with the biscuit cutter. Because feeling needed to find some expression, or perhaps to disguise it, his Aunt Sally pulled his curls playfully and pressed tickling kisses into his fat white neck.



"Annie, dear, I hate to have you keep on working so hard. Do stop," she admonished her sister-in-law tenderly. "Joe, I wish you'd make Annie go up stairs and rest. She ought to."

"Go along with you, Annie," Mr. Haselton endorsed lazily.

"You can see what you're coming to," he told his sister. "You'll soon be drudging away in a kitchen of your own, eh?"

She shook her head gaily. "No, I shan't. I always did like house-keeping. I don't think it's drudgery at all."

Her brother was looking at the tall alert girl, with a realization new to him, of her womanly charm, her wholesome attractiveness. Until very recently she had been accepted simply as part of his daily portion, his sister Sally to be teased and scolded and loved as a matter of course. But to-morrow she would no longer be here. Until that moment he had not realized how much he was going to miss her. He forgot about the pruning shears.

The air drifting in through the open window was charged with honey essence from the white grape-like clusters of the honey locust trees. The sweetness drifted across the senses of the three there in the pleasant old kitchen, interpenetrated with an emotion that was sweet too, tender, quivering, not unhappy, in spite of its wistful perception of change and parting.



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A subtle telegraphy sent messages from one to the other.

"I'm not ever going to forget how good you and Annie have been," Sarah Haselton said, and choked a treacherous quiver in her voice with an uncertain laugh. Demonstration did not come easily to a girl who had inherited New England traditions of reserve and self-control. But something in the warm good will enveloping her, the moved response of her brother's eyes, shook her out of her habitual mood. Reticence for once loosened its clutch. Buoyantly she stepped across the room and laid an arm around her brother's shoulders, and bent over and kissed his rough cheek with her soft fresh lips.

Joseph pulled her down to a seat upon his knee, his arms close around her. "Why shouldn't I be good to you, all the sister I have?"

Mrs. Haselton watched them with a sympathetic quiver of the lips, a dew softening her sisterly eyes. Then Sarah sprang up. "I must go and dress. It's almost time for William to be here." The three shook themselves out of the clutch of emotion.

"Where are the pruning shears, Annie?" asked Joseph. On his way to the back door, he stopped at her side. "Here, give us a kiss, old lady," he demanded. He took it from her willing lips, and went off whistling, with a happy sense of security in her.

The children playing in the village streets glanced with interest at the Haselton house, at



Mr. Haselton clipping the box borders. "Miss Sally's going to be married to-morrow," they told each other. The knowledge seemed to invest the familiar place with delightful and dramatic mystery. All that it would be possible to see of the wedding from outside the white picket fence, the children meant to see. Manorton was not a place of many happenings.

Joseph Haselton was still clipping when a sedate young man came driving along the quiet street in a buggy, a new buggy with a fine glitter on its black varnish. The glossy bay horse looked new, too, so shining were his sleek sides, so well curried his waving mane. The nickel rings on the harness glittered. There seemed to be a very cheerful understanding between the people at their front windows and the few passers-by on the street, with the young man in the new buggy. He sat very straight, enduring the smiles of greeting with determined stoicism; and kept quite busy touching his hat in response. He drove very slowly as he approached the Haselton house; and his keen gray eyes travelled reconnoiteringly to certain windows on the second floor. Then, disappointed of what they sought, surveyed approvingly the pretty, orderly place.

The Haselton house, situated conspicuously in the heart of the village, opposite the hotel, had been a landmark in Manorton for a hundred and fifty years. It possessed all the cheerful serenity of well-preserved age in its fresh coat of white



paint and trim green blinds; and then the betrayals of its time-stained chimneys, the sagging lines of its foundations, and the hollows where rain water collected, worn by the feet of many generations in the broad stone steps.

Joseph Haselton threw down his shears and stepped briskly out to the horse-block. "Hello, William. Got here, have you? Come on in."

His bluff, hearty manner seemed to accentuate the extremely courteous reserve of the young man in the buggy. William Van Besten did not easily relax from a certain dignity of demeanor which usually held off familiarities on the part of his acquaintances. He shook his head at Joseph's invitation. "Not now, thank you, Joe. I'll go over to the hotel first and leave my horse and get my room. Then I'll be back. Everybody all right, I suppose?" Again his gray eyes sought those upper windows.

"Meaning Sally, of course," Joseph said quizzically. "Yes, she's all right. Fine. But she's been working herself almost to death over her clothes and I don't know what all. You'd think she expected you to carry her off to a desert island where she'd never be able to get anything again."

William laughed happily, his eyes always returning to the upper windows. "Well, I'll be back shortly," he said.

When he had driven on, Mr. Haselton stepped close to the house and whistled. "Hey, there, Sally! William's come," he called.



A laugh floated down to him. "Don't you suppose I know that, Joe, dear?"

Joseph and his wife and William Van Besten were sitting together on the front porch when Sally joined them. "Good evening, William," she said sedately.

As William rose to greet her, he forgot to answer, but Sally did not care, for she read in his brightening eyes such emphatic approval of her appearance. Smiling more easily than his wont, he took her hand and held it tightly, until she drew it away with laughing reproof in her eyes, on her lips. Her clear hazel eyes smiled frankly back at him. She was entirely self-possessed. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Haselton watched the two with indulgent sympathy. Somehow it seemed a little difficult to go on with the trivial chit-chat about the preparations for to-morrow.

Mrs. Haselton jumped up. "Come, Joe, let's go in the house. I guess William and Sally can entertain each other just as well without us." She and her husband drifted away considerably.

"Joe, those two aren't having half such a good time as we had," Mrs. Haselton whispered.

"I bet they ain't," her husband answered. "They couldn't." Delicious waves of recollection surged over the young husband and wife as they stood arm in arm. "But I guess they're enjoying themselves all right. What makes you think they aren't, old girl?"

"Oh yes, they're enjoying themselves," she said.



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"Only they're so dreadfully practical. They act as if they'd been married ten years already."

"Well, well, that's their way," Joe said.

"I like our way better."

"You bet," said Joe, with an emphatic kiss.

William and Sally drew their chairs back farther into the fragrant obscurity afforded by the honeysuckle vine. The summer stars slowly multiplied overhead. Fireflies jewelled the old lilac and syringa bushes. Long rays from the electric light before the hotel filtered through the honeysuckle, and made it possible for each to see the other's face. William leaned over and took Sally's hand, that fluttered in his an instant, then lay there acquiescent. Delightful content enveloped them and yet a certain nervousness impelled her to speech.

"Annie and I have had such a busy day," she told him. "A thousand last things to do and people coming to interrupt the livelong time."

"I suppose so." William's attention was wholly hers and yet he did not seem to be paying much heed to what she said. Conscious of an unusual flutter of spirit, Sarah leaned back in her chair, so close to his, and scrutinized the man whom she was to marry. Her judgment approved of him. William was tall and clean looking and sensible-looking; and she had known about him so long, even before she knew him, that there was no element of uncertainty as to her future with him. All her friends felt so delightfully



sure that she was doing well and that William was doing well too. She was very fond of William; and then he was so very fond of her. She told herself that she appreciated his good disposition, strong and kind and sensible. Yes, she certainly was going to be very happy. Nothing would have induced her to marry William if she did not care for him; but then certainly it added satisfaction that he should be a man of assured social position, and a man assured of a comfortable livelihood, the proprietor of the most important general store in the town of Kirton, a business inherited from his father. Sarah Haselton was distinctly pleased at the thought of becoming mistress of the fine brick mansion on the outskirts of Kirton, where William had lived all his twenty-nine years.

William drew closer in the fragrant twilight. His arm was about her shoulders. Sarah Haselton delighted to feel herself a sensible, self-controlled person, a girl with no nonsense about her; but now a flutter of agitation wholly pleasant stirred her pulses. Well, a girl has a right to feel somewhat excited on her wedding eve. The day had been a busy and exciting one, trying in many ways, this last day at home. After all, to have William here close beside her; to lean against him, her hand in his, was more restful than disturbing. She enjoyed this calm moment before the beginning of the new life. The remembrance was very present in her mind, that to-morrow night at this



hour, she and William would be man and wife, alone together in the home that was to be hers all the rest of her days.

"Annie's tired out," she roused herself to speak. "She would insist upon the house being made spick and span from garret to cellar. William," her voice softened—"she and Joe have been awfully kind."

He drew her closer. "So they have. They've been as kind as possible to both of us. Dear, I should think they would hate the sight of me. They're going to miss you very much."

The weight of the unexpressed hung over the man and the girl left so considerately to themselves, shut away in the fragrant darkness from any intrusion of other people's eyes. The summer night thrilled with expectancy. Sally tapped her bright little black slipper nervously against the floor of the piazza and looked back at William less straightforwardly than usual. He was watching her intently, leaning forward so that his good manly countenance was not far from her glowing, downcast face.

"Sally, I'm thinking how pleased my father and mother would have been." His voice was a trifle husky.

"Yes, isn't it nice that our families have always been such good friends?"

Again that charged silence.

"You said the other day that we ought to have old-fashioned andirons in the sitting room fireplace. I bought some beauties for you yesterday.



Heavy old-fashioned brass affairs. I hope you will like them."

"Oh, yes, of course I shall," she said, appreciatively. "How good of you to remember that I wanted them. I do love handsome old-time things, and they suit your old house ever so much better than modern stuff does. They're ever so much better made, too. But William, whatever possessed you to put that shiny oak set in your dining-room," she reproached, lightly. "Why, it swears with everything else in the whole house."

"Does it, dear?" William laughed comfortably at the reflection upon his taste. "I paid a pretty good price for that set. I thought it was all right but you know more about such things than I do. Anyway, if you don't like it, we can easily get rid of it. I want you to have things the way you like them."

She felt his attitude to be most satisfactory. William was dimly feeling that he and Sally were not altogether living up to the romantic requirements of this particular evening. He picked up a little book lying on the table near him, and leaned forward so that the light fell upon its pages. Poetry. William was rather fond of poetry, with which he had beguiled many a lonely home evening. Poetry seemed the appropriate expression for the situation. Lovers always read poetry. So William had understood. He began to read aloud. Sally listened patiently for some time, then her restless hand stole over her head to the back of



the chair. She stifled a tired little yawn.

William glanced up in some dismay. Her eyes were brimming with mischievous amusement. "Wouldn't you really rather talk?" she asked. "The idea of your starting in to read poetry to me to-night. Why, William, we aren't that kind!"

A slow color crept up William's cheeks as he obediently closed the volume. "Perhaps we're not, Sally." He replaced the book upon the table and leaned back in his chair. He compressed his full strong lips, which gave him a resolute air. He had a little trick of doing that; and Sally liked it, yet occasionally she had secretly wondered just what the expression betokened. Would William be obstinate upon occasion? That would not matter. She had a will herself which she intended, in a perfectly good tempered and justifiable fashion, to exercise for his good and her own. Of course wives ought to defer to their husbands more or less, and she meant to do so. In fact she meant to be a most excellent and tactful wife. Of course she must expect William to have his little faults and crotchets. All men did. Was William annoyed because she had interrupted his reading? She glanced at him in humorous inquiry.

William's blue-gray eyes looked back rather wistfully. "We're not a very sentimental couple, are we, Sally?"

"No, thank goodness, we're not," she answered,



heartily. "I'd be ashamed to act like some engaged people I've known."

The clock struck eleven, which is considered late in Manorton.

Again Sally stifled a yawn. Her exhausted attitude was suggestive.

"Perhaps I ought to go now," William said, reluctantly. "Are you very tired, Sally?"

"Yes, I am tired to-night," she answered, frankly. "You see, I've been so busy all day."

"You must get a good rest to-night." Still he lingered, finding it very hard to go away, feeling somehow that there was a great deal to say if only he could find words—his hopes for their future, his gratitude to her for putting an end to his long loneliness, his tenderness for her, for the calm, blooming girl so serenely trusting her life to his keeping. But Sally's calm manner did not invite expression of sentiment. She seemed to be waiting patiently for him to go. He gave himself a little shake and rose reluctantly.

"Can I see you in the morning, do you suppose?"

"Yes, for a little while, if you'll come early, right after breakfast." Sally's breath quickened under his glance. She rose involuntarily, to hide her perturbation. The man caught her two hands and the pulsing in his veins seemed to course into hers. This was the most ardent moment their courtship had known. With a startled, arrested look, she watched, fascinated, an odd little mist gather and drift across William's



straightforward gray eyes. Her heart throbbed violently as he drew her closer, closer, as though feeling her will. He bent his head and kissed her on the lips. They had been engaged for six months, but until now William had still been diffident at kissing. With an agitated little laugh, half mockery, half defiance, Sally pulled herself away.

"Now, William, it's getting late. You mustn't be foolish! Yes, you really must go now. Stop! William!"

She stood listening while his steps died away in the direction of the hotel. She was genuinely tired, but it was impossible to go to bed just now. William's kisses had strangely thrilled her. She paced swiftly up and down in the darkness. William was a dear fellow. She had never realized before how much she cared for him. Oh, she must be a good wife to him, make him happy. Her mind was a tangle of plans for the future, which she was too tired and excited to-night to unravel. She smiled tenderly to herself, picturing the discomfort of William's queer man's house-keeping. He had taken her all over his big untidy house; and she had quietly noted for future reform many more matters than she had mentioned to him.

Presently her sister-in-law came to the front door, and knew from the silence that William must have gone. "Sally, are you out here still?" she asked. "If you don't get to bed, you won't



be fit to be seen to-morrow," she warned tenderly, and came out on the veranda and put her arm around Sally.

A great wave of love for her own people, her old home, swept over Sarah Haselton, as with moistened eyes, she kissed Annie and Joseph good-night and went upstairs.



## CHAPTER II

### AN UNEXPECTED RETURN

“**T**HERE isn’t any Miss Sally any more.” The village children who were not cousins and therefore not invited to the wedding, had hung about the Haselton place all the summer afternoon. They had watched the arrival of William Van Besten, and of the wedding guests; and would have dearly loved to see what was going on in the old-fashioned flower-decked parlors, to have witnessed the ceremony that was to transform familiar Miss Sally into somebody else. They had clung to the fence breathless with interest, the toes of their shabby shoes thrust between the pickets, their hands grasping the pointed tops, while a chorus drifted out from the house across the yard. When the children saw Dr. Lanson, the Presbyterian clergyman, and Mrs. Lanson approaching, they jumped down from the fence and gathered in a respectful group. The Doctor, an impressive personality in his black broadcloth and silk hat, nodded to them condescendingly. Mrs. Lanson, slight and



nerveworn and a bit dowdy in the black silk which had been her best dress all the years that she had lived in Manorton, smiled at them in amused sympathy as she passed, trying always to adapt her shorter steps to her husband's measured stride.

"They'll have it now the Minister's come," said Millie Thompson, eagerly. She lived next door to the Haseltons, and was old enough to feel half ashamed of her curiosity. She was a half-grown girl with bright, untidy hair and a chronic self-consciousness as to her shabby and outgrown clothes. To-day she had happily forgotten herself in her eagerness to see all that she possibly could of the alluring romance, that had come so near, only next door. Presently the wide front door was flung open. The hall seemed full of people, and then the children saw the bride laughing, protesting, thrusting out impetuous hands, break away from embraces and congratulations, and laughing nervously, run down the front path and jump into the waiting buggy. "Come, William, hurry up!" She called imperatively. The children watched the white streamer tied to the buggy wheel,—which Mr. Van Besten stoically endured for the moment, and would remove as soon as he was out of sight,—the shower of rice in which the buggy drove away. The little girls looked on wistfully, their little feminine natures strangely stirred by the spectacle, by the fairy tale allurements of a wedding.

"There isn't any Miss Sally any more."



"Yes, there is, Millie. Yes, there is. I saw her." Small Bobby Thompson tugged at his sister's hand. "Miss Sally isn't dead. I saw her."

"Of course she isn't dead, you little silly," his sister laughed at him. "But she's married. She isn't Miss Sally any longer. She's Mrs. Van Besten now."

But Bobby still was puzzled.

The wedding guests gradually departed, those from a distance coming out first to seek their carriages under the hotel shed or along the hitching posts in front. Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Haselton were glad when the last village friend had told them what a pretty wedding it had been, and what a lovely bride Sally made, and what a satisfaction it must be to her brother and sister to know that she was happily married to a good substantial fellow like Mr. Van Besten. Annie Haselton gave a great sigh of relief as she shut the front door. "Thank goodness, they're all gone! Oh, Joe, I'm so tired! Come, sit down a minute and let's talk it over."

Joseph Haselton threw himself beside her on the haircloth sofa and stretched out his long legs. "Phew, what a day's work! Well, old woman, everything seemed to go off all right, eh?"

"Everybody seemed to think so," his wife said, with deep satisfaction. She stretched out her tired arms as she leaned against him. Both found the moment good.

"What a looking house!" Mrs. Haselton



glanced about at her disordered furniture, at the roses and syringas already beginning to droop in their vases, at the litter of pink and white and crimson petals drifting down upon the carpet. She leaned back against her husband with a contented sigh. "I don't care. I shan't touch a thing until to-morrow."

Little Joe, crooning happily to himself, prowled around the room, usually a forbidden domain to him, investigating its appointments with interest.

"You ought to be in bed, you rascal!" His father lifted him to his knee and tickled his soft neck, and the baby shouted with merriment. Father and mother were pleasantly weary, enjoying rest with a happy consciousness of an affectionate duty well performed. The home atmosphere was full of peace.

Little Joe sat facing the front windows. Suddenly he stopped his play. "There's Aunt Sally," he said.

His father laughed, thinking it baby mischief. "No she isn't, you rogue, you."

But little Joe pointed persistently. "Aunt Sally's comin'."

"I wonder who he sees," his mother said, turning idly to follow the gesture of the little hand. Then her expression changed. She jumped up, startled. "Why, it is, Joe! It certainly is Sally!" She turned back to him with a look of bewilderment.

Her husband set the child down and followed her to the window. Little Joe was not mistaken.



The bride who had driven gaily away from their door a few hours earlier, was walking toward it now, stepping briskly along just outside the white picket fence. Mrs. Allan, a neighbor, dropped her fancywork and leaned out of her window and gazed in astonishment. Mr. Harlan Morgan and Mr. Allen Mackenzie, the gentlemanly black sheep of Manorton, just then on their way to supper at the hotel, paused on the steps at sight of Sally. They held aloof from all social events, but even they knew that she had been married that afternoon. The group of loungers on the hotel piazza set their tilted chairs down on all fours in order to stare from a firmer equilibrium. Sarah Van Besten paid no attention to wondering eyes, as looking straight before her, holding her head very erect, she came on briskly and unlatched the front gate. Her quick feet crunched the rice still lying thick upon the path.

Annie and Joseph hurried out into the hall. As the door opened, Annie laid hold upon Sarah and drew her into the house. "Oh, Sally, what has happened?"

"Where's William?" asked Joseph.

Sally looked from one to the other, her face stoically wan and rigid. Her lips were so dry that it was hard for her to speak.

"Have you had an accident? Where's William?" Joseph asked again. A blight of consternation had fallen upon both him and Annie at Sally's aspect.



Sally answered with a wretched smile. Tears could not have conveyed a sense of tragedy more instantly than that strained and mirthless smile. "William has gone on home. I made him let me out. He didn't want to. I made him."

"But why, why?" demanded Joseph, in an appealing sort of way.

In an effort to indicate the situation without words, Sally's tense fingers unpinned and took off her pretty new hat. Joe Haselton saw how the fingers trembled. The wan excitement in his sister's face went to his heart. He went over to her and put his arms around her. "Poor girl! You're trembling so you can hardly stand. Now, what's all this mess about? I don't understand. Tell brother, dear."

In response to his tenderness, she clung to him for a moment, feeling as she had used to feel when she was a little girl and he was her big protecting brother who would allow no one to bully her but himself. "What is it?" he asked, and his tone was affectionately peremptory.

Sally drew herself out of his arms. "I can't tell you, Joe. Please let me go. I can't talk about it."

Without a look at him or Annie, leaving brother and sister staring helplessly, incredulously, after her, she went swiftly from the room. They heard her bed-room door close quietly behind her, the key turn in its lock. Evidently Sally wished to be let alone. The husband and wife, dumb with



surprise, looked at each other. All the serenity of their contented fatigue had been dispelled.

"Well, of all the fool actions!" Joseph Haselton exclaimed at last. Frowning, he walked excitedly about the room.

"What can it mean?" asked his wife, pale with the surprise.

"I can't understand it at all. Of all the unlikely things!" Joseph thrust his hands impatiently into his pockets. "Out of the way, youngster." He pushed the wondering baby gently out of his course and fumed up and down. His wife, watching his puzzled frown, saw it pierced as by a dire ray of understanding.

"What, Joe?" she questioned eagerly.

Joseph stopped and looked down upon her, his teeth upon his lip, deliberating. Her eyes still questioned.

"Say, Annie, do you suppose he's told her anything?" Joseph lowered his voice as though to guard against even little Joe's unwitting ears.

"What? Told her what?" Annie whispered back.

They looked blankly at each other, then Annie spoke with energy. "I can't believe William Van Besten's ever been that kind of a man!"

"I'm not saying that story was true," Joe hastened to say. "I tell you I've never believed it." Whatever the truth, he and Annie felt unwillingly obliged to wait still longer. Sally paid no attention to their questioning glances,



their expectant attitude. Except for meals, she spent most of the time in her own room. If, when she was downstairs, the doorbell rang, or a footstep sounded on the walk outside the kitchen door, she fled away upstairs. Whenever wheels were heard on the village street, Mrs. Haselton could hear Sally's steps toward the window.

"She's expecting him," she told Joe. "I guess it's going to come right."

"Why, it's bound to come right if we're all patient. Such a good fellow as William and a girl like Sally."

But William Van Besten did not come the first day or the second. He did not come at all. Sally held herself proudly before her family and sought no sympathy. But her flesh seemed to drop away from her visibly; and the strained expectation in her face, in spite of her determined self-control, was a revelation.

Those days of readjustment were uneasy and irksome to the Haselton household.

"Are you going to church, Sally?" Mrs. Haselton asked almost timidly when Sunday came.

Sally shrugged a shoulder defiantly. "Yes, I am," she said. "I won't pretend I wouldn't rather stay home, but people have got to stare at me some time, I suppose, and the sooner they get used to seeing me around the better." Annie sighed. She looked wishful of confidence, but Sally said no more.

When Sally dressed for church, some sentiment



kept her from decking herself in one of the new pretty gowns of her wedding equipment. Instead, she wore a gown that the Presbyterian congregation had seen many times. When she walked up the aisle and took her usual seat, many of her acquaintances were inclined to wonder if they had dreamed her in her bridal white, had dreamed her cheerful wedding and her gay departure for her new home. But she was paler than usual; and to feel herself a focus for wondering glances, gave her a rigid look of endurance.

"How are you ever going to explain to the neighbors?" Mrs. Haselton had ventured to ask.

"I'm not going to explain," Sally answered, defiantly. "What business is it of theirs, I'd like to know?"

"Of course it isn't, dear, but still—people will ask questions, you know." Mrs. Haselton's gentle young countenance was sorely perplexed. "What do you want me to tell people?" she asked, almost pleadingly.

"Tell them the truth," Sally said, sharply. "Tell them you know nothing whatever about it. I don't believe they'll ask me many questions," she said, bitterly. Nor did they.

Mrs. Allan made the attempt in the vestibule after service. "Why, Sally, my dear, you certainly have surprised folks." Thus she addressed her. "What does it all mean?"

Sally's head went back in rigid erectness, and she opposed stony silence to the question. The



sedate church-goers on their way out had keen eyes and ears for the little encounter.

"Aren't you going to answer me?" asked Mrs. Allan.

Sally looked back at her with warning sparks in her defiant hazel eyes. "No, ma'am, I'm not."

Mrs. Allan wavered and weakened almost to tears in her surprise and bafflement. "Well, upon my word!" she said, weakly. "I didn't expect you to meet me like this. As if I would have any motive but kind feeling for you. An old friend of your mother's like me, that's known you all your life." Her somber old eyes looked angrily at the tall, defiant girl.

"I think my old friends ought to be kind enough not to question me on such a trying subject," Sally said, with dignity, and passed on. Mrs. Allan perceived restrained smiles directed at her own discomfiture, which wounded her.

When Sally had not spoken out at the end of a week, Joseph Haselton drove to Kirton. Sally looked perturbed as she watched his preparations for the trip. Finally she went close to him. "See here, Joe, I know you're going up to see William. I wish you wouldn't," she said earnestly. "It won't do any good. Please let William alone." He could see that she found it hard to break her resolution of reserve.

Joseph turned to her with an approach to anger.

"Of course I'm going to see William, unless you'll



act like a sensible woman and tell us what's the matter. The fellow's got to answer to me for deserting you. He's got to tell me why you two are acting like a couple of fools." He regarded her unkindly, his patience at an end.

"He didn't desert me," Sally cried. "I made him let me out of the buggy. He couldn't help it. Oh, I wish you wouldn't interfere!" she cried, in exasperation. "It's nobody's business but his and mine. I wish you'd let William alone!"

Joseph did not vouchsafe to answer. He stalked grimly out of the door, climbed into his wagon, and drove off.

The first thing he did when he reached Kirton was to go to Van Besten's store.

A cheerful effect of prosperity stamped the broad entrance and handsome plate glass windows of the biggest store in Kirton. All along Joseph Haselton's countryside, as well as up in Kirton, Van Besten's enjoyed a reputation for good and reliable goods. Joseph's family had bought there as long as he could remember.

William Van Besten was giving directions to a salesman when Joseph Haselton entered. In his working day aspect he looked shrewd, alert, positive. His somewhat deliberate voice, entirely courteous, had yet the positive ring of calm authority. As he saw Joe, his eyes, his whole attitude, grew expectant for a fleeting instant. "Good morning, Joe," he greeted him.

Joe, slightly flurried, ignored the salutation.



"See here, William, can I have a few words with you in private?" he asked.

"Certainly. Come back to my office," William said briefly, a slight chill creeping into his tone at Joseph's manner.

He led the way to a small square office partitioned off at the rear. He closed the door.

"Won't you sit down? What is it?"

In William's familiar presence, Joseph clutched after his wrath in vain. It evaporated and left him only expostulatory.

"William, I've come to find out what's wrong between you and Sally." He paused and looked inquiringly at William, but William said nothing. "How could you let her come streaking home alone as you did?" He tried to speak firmly, authoritatively, as one deeply wronged, but he sounded only mildly reproachful.

William's expression was severely impenetrable. "Do you think I wanted her to do that?" he asked.

"I know you didn't want her to. In fact, she says so," Joseph hastened to concede. "But what I want to know is what the trouble is about."

William looked back at him impenetrably. "Why don't you ask your sister to tell you?"

Joseph's feet tapped the floor impatiently. "We've tried to, Annie and I. All Sally will say is that it is nobody's business, but yours and hers."

"She thinks so, does she? I agree with her," William said composedly and his voice sounded



hard. William's fashion of pressing his firm lips together convinced the other that argument would be futile.

"You're as stubborn as mules, the pair of you," Joseph complained. "I'd like to know what you mean—marrying a girl like Sally and then deserting her on her wedding day."

At that, William roused to animation. An angry light shone in his gray eyes. "You can't say that. I never deserted Sally. I tried to have her go home with me, but she would have her own way. You would not have had me coerce her, I suppose."

"I don't know but I would," Joe said. "It's been mighty unpleasant for Annie and me," he complained.

William spoke up resolutely. "I told her then, and I say again to you now, that she must come to me of her own free will, or else abide by her own decision."

Joseph watched him curiously. "You're pretty hot against her, aren't you? Well, I don't pretend to understand it all or who's to blame. Good Lord, man, she's your wife, isn't she? Sally's a spirited girl, quick-tempered may be, but I've always said she'd make a mighty good wife." His puzzled eyes studied William Van Besten, the clean, manly look of the fellow, the stubborn resolve in the gray eyes, the strong lips. "See here, William, you're the good fellow I've always thought. I can't be mistaken in you," he cried



impulsively. "Come along down home with me now, and have a talk with Sally. That's the only way you'll ever get this straightened out."

But William shook his head decidedly. "No, I can't do that, Joe. That is, not unless she sends for me. Any time that she does that, I will go at once."

"It's too much for me," Joseph commented again, after a puzzled pause. "Well, I don't suppose I've gained anything by coming, but I had to come. I'm bound to do what I can for Sally, even if she does resent it. I'll go along now."

"Wait a minute." William had turned toward his big desk as though to screen his face. When he swung his revolving chair around again his voice had changed, sounded slightly embarrassed. "See here, Joe, there's one other matter. Of course, in the eyes of the law, Sally is my wife. I recognize that, recognize it, I wish to, and of course I wish to provide for her. You and I had better arrange the money matters between us, I think."

"I guess Sally'll have something to say about that," Sally's brother commented.

"I desire to settle a suitable allowance upon her," William said, steadily; "and I hope you will persuade her that her proper course is to make no difficulty about accepting it." There was another pause. William spoke again. "I should like to have you tell your sister that when she's ready to fulfil her part of our contract, I stand ready to fulfil my part. Tell her I still consider



my house her proper home, and that it is always waiting for her if at any time she changes her mind and is willing to come to it."

"That's all you want me to tell her?"

"That's all."

A cunning expression lit Joseph's eyes. "You will have to deliver your own messages, William. I can't act for you—not in the dark."

He followed these comments with a shrewd glance, but William remained cold and silent.

When Joseph returned to Manorton he reported the interview faithfully to Sally. "I told you it wouldn't do any good to go to him. Why couldn't you listen to me?" she reproached, her face flushing with hurt pride. "I wish you hadn't gone. Do you suppose I'd let him make me an allowance?" she demanded, indignantly. "I wouldn't take his money if I were perishing!" Her voice quavered.

"You don't need to. If that's the way you feel about it, I wouldn't," her brother said.

"I mean to take care of myself," Sarah Van Besten declared.

Of course people talked. The Manorton people talked and the Kirton people talked. As time went on the trouble that separated William Van Besten and Sally, his wife, became a perennial topic of conversation, always cropping up whenever everything else failed.

For, in spite of all cheerful prophecies to the contrary, the situation lasted.



Sarah Van Besten never forgot the first note that she wrote after her marriage. The first time that she had occasion to sign her new name, the swift pen suddenly paused; then her fingers tightened on it, and she wrote the name boldly, but with a sinking at her heart. She remembered how she had once looked forward to doing this with pride and pleasure, but now the little act filled her with humiliation. She never drooped or made appeal for pity before the eyes of her world, and she showed herself as brightly self-sufficient as before her marriage; but now, shut in her lonely room with the door locked she suddenly laid her face down upon the litter of writing materials, her face wet with stinging tears of shame.

“William, how can you be so hard and cruel?” she whispered, pitifully. “You said you cared for me. Wasn’t I just as tired and nervous as I could be that day? Was I unreasonable? What if I was unreasonable? I thought you cared for me. You don’t even care enough to try again.”



## CHAPTER III

### SALLY FINDS SHOPPING DIFFICULT

JOSEPH HASELTON had spent a busy morning in his paper mill on the bank of the Manor Creek. Everybody in Manorton was familiar with the big rustling loads of rye straw which the neighboring farmers brought to the Haselton mill to be converted into brown wrapping paper. When twelve o'clock struck, Mr. Haselton left the mill and walked home with a well-earned appetite. His wife was setting the dinner table, and the jingle of knives and forks, the clink of dishes, was music to his ears as he threw himself on the lounge under the window.

"Where's Sally?" he asked, cautiously.

"Gone to the postoffice," his wife told him.

Joseph drew a breath of relief, as one who could now speak out. "Say, Annie, I'm getting sick and tired of this," he said, in a less repressed way. "She's no business to be so non-committal. We've a right to know." His usually amiable face grew frowning and perplexed. "Folks keep on sort of questioning or beating around the



subject, and I feel like a fool trying to wriggle out of it."

"It is awfully trying," his wife said, sympathetically.

Joseph sat up and thumped the sofa cushions. "I can tell you one thing, I'm not going to put up with it much longer. Some of these days I shall speak out very plainly to Sally."

"Hush. Here she comes," his wife warned quickly.

When Sally entered the room, Joseph was explaining the necessity of sharpening the lawn mower. She handed him a letter and paper and went away again. Mrs. Haselton waited until she must be out of hearing, and then resumed the tantalizing, never exhausted subject.

"I don't think she ought to keep it secret from you and me." Annie paused in her task of cutting the bread, the broad-bladed knife suspended. She looked intense. "Joe, that story about William. Don't you suppose there's somebody who could tell you whether its true or not? Why don't you find out?"

"Even if I could, what good would it do?" he answered. "We don't know that it had anything to do with this."

"What else could make Sally act so?" she urged. A shadow fell through the window and she glanced out and saw Sally sewing on the porch. "Gracious!" she exclaimed, in a startled whisper. "I didn't know she was out there. Do you suppose she could hear?"



Somehow, her friends could not have told exactly how, Sarah Van Besten made it impossible to allude in her presence to the difficulty between herself and William Van Besten. Several times when she was not with them, her brother and sister-in-law boldly resolved to demand her confidence, but they never did. The most daring among her acquaintances made tentative advances toward the subject, then retreated from it in discomfiture. The hedge of reserve behind which she entrenched herself was impenetrable.

"It's wonderful how she keeps on for all the world as though nothing had happened," said old Mrs. Allan, who never forgot or forgave the snubbing that Sally had administered in the church vestibule. "All I've got to say is, no girl with much heart could act as she does. I've always thought Sally Haselton was a selfish, cold-natured kind of girl." For Mrs. Allan, in her baffled curiosity, had failed to interpret aright the hurt self-love, the deeper pain, that throbbed in Sally's voice that June Sunday.

This later day, when matters seemed to have shaken themselves into something like a stable groove, Sally gave her friends another shock. Joseph Haselton, returning from his day's work, found his wife and his sister in the sitting-room with signs of storm upon their faces.

"Hello, girls, what's wrong?" he asked.

His wife appealed to him. "Joe, what do you think Sally wants to do now? She says she's



going to take in sewing. She's going to turn dressmaker."

"Not much. She isn't." Mr. Haselton looked from one agitated face to the other, not greatly troubled himself. He felt that here was occasion for the application of a little masculine sense and discretion. "I've got something to say about that." He sat down, judicially, in the biggest armchair in the room. "Don't be foolish, Sally."

"It's not foolishness. I am going to, Joe. I've made up my mind." Sally was nervously decided.

"Then you may as well unmake it straight off," he told her, bluffly. "See here, Sally, there isn't the slightest need for you to do anything of the kind."

"I know. You're very kind, Joe. You and Annie." Sally regarded him gratefully. "But I'd rather take care of myself. Don't you see? I'd rather. I'd rather." Her voice was nervously sharp.

"But I'd rather you didn't. Do you suppose I want folks to think that I'm too mean to take care of my own sister? Have I ever grudged you your keep?" Joe tried to speak jocularly, to make light of the matter as a girlish whim.

Sally refused to treat it as a jest. "I'm perfectly well able to take care of myself, and there isn't any reason why I shouldn't. I'd ever so much rather." She clenched her nervous hands in an impulse of desperation. "Oh, Joe; please



don't oppose me. Don't you see I've got to have something to do?" Uneasy sense that she was suffering stirred her brother's consciousness. He weakened. "There's plenty for you to do right here," he grumbled. "Help Annie."

"That isn't enough. No, no, you and Annie must let me have my own way in this. People shall understand that it isn't your fault. I hate to have you feel so about it, but you mustn't try to hinder me. I'm going to do it, even if I have to go somewhere else to live. I can do that if you and Annie'd rather have me." She spoke defiantly.

"That's nonsense, of course," Joseph said, roughly. "This is your home. Have your own way if you must. I don't like it and Annie don't like it, but you don't care anything about our wishes."

"Yes, I do. Please don't say that, Joe," Sally entreated.

Miss Sally Haselton had long made her own pretty dresses. Her friends had often told her admiringly that she was as skillful as any professional dressmaker. Many who lived in isolated Manorton were glad enough to employ her skill. She had but to make known her willingness for custom and it poured in upon the new dressmaker. Although Joseph and Annie kept up a certain pretence of disapproval, she soon felt them growing reconciled to her success. All bitterness gradually died out of the situation. One subject lay locked and barred away even from allusion



between Mr. and Mrs. Haselton and their sister; but the fact was finally understood, and peace reigned again in the household. A superficial observer might have decided that Mrs. Van Besten's busy life went along as serenely as though she and William had never courted and wed.

Sally sat sewing in her big front chamber. As she worked, she felt mildly entertained by the comings and goings on the village street. She heard the Thompson's gate slam and saw Millie Thompson rushing off somewhere. Then she saw two of her customers coming along the grass-bordered, unpaved sidewalk. They were conversing earnestly, and from their glances toward the Haselton house, Mrs. Van Besten felt convinced that they were discussing her affairs. A bitter smile curved Sally's firm red lips. She drew her chair back from observation.

The ladies arrived. Mrs. Van Besten, while courteous, confined her attention strictly to the business in hand. When the ladies tried to draw her into their chat of neighborhood happenings, she refused to overstep the professional relation. "You haven't told me yet how you want your dress made. What about the trimming? Will you get it or shall I? If you like I'll see what I can find for you in Kirton."

Mrs. Wynne hesitated. "I don't know. Do you suppose I can get anything good enough in Kirton?" The city visitor's tone stamped hopeless mediocrity upon all Kirton shops.



"There's Van Besten's," suggested Mrs. Brownson. "There's usually a pretty good assortment at Van Besten's." She gave Sally an inquisitive look.

William's wife bore the look unflinchingly. "Now if you'll please turn around slowly so that I can see how your skirt hangs," she requested Mrs. Wynne.

Mrs. Wynne revolved stiffly. "Then if you'd just as soon, you might look," she said, evidently still doubtful of Van Besten's possibilities.

Mrs. Van Besten was softly adjusting the hem of the checked silk skirt. She drew back and surveyed her handiwork, her head on one side, her eyes absorbed and critical. "Van Besten's is generally considered the best department store between Albany and New York," she informed Mrs. Wynne briefly, in the calm, impersonal manner of one impelled by abstract justice to enlighten the ignorant.

Mrs. Wynne and Mrs. Brownson went away, and before they were fairly out of the gate, resumed the topic they had left there.

"Don't you think she's nice?" Mrs. Brownson claimed mead of praise for her friend and dress-maker. "Sally's such a smart, capable girl. Of course, we Manorton folks think she must have found out something dreadful to make her leave him like that right after the wedding. Why, the company had hardly got away from the wedding reception before she came walking home again."



Mrs. Wynne nodded solemnly. "It must have been something awful," she agreed. "Probably he made her a confession of something in his past life that he ought to have let her know before he married her."

"Of course, living all alone up there in that big house, with plenty of money, left to his own devices, a young man like that, there's no telling—"

"Of course not," Mrs. Wynne agreed emphatically.

"I never heard a thing against him until after this happened," Mrs. Brownson admitted; "but my husband says there was a story about him when he was younger, oh, several years ago, a horrid story." She lowered her voice.

Mrs. Wynne listened and commented. "Anyway, as long as she didn't know anything about it before she was married, I think she ought to have made the best of her bargain. I don't think she had any right to back out of it then. People have no business to disregard appearances. It was dreadfully bad taste to act as she did."

In quest of Mrs. Wynne's trimming and other matters, Sally drove up to Kirton with Perry Herter, the Manorton mail-carrier. The glint of curiosity in his faded blue eyes made her wrap herself closer in her chosen reticence.

"Nice mornin', Miss Sally," he addressed her affably. Then he smiled appreciatively at his own mistake. "Mis' Van Besten, I should say," he amended.



"Yes, it is a nice day," Sally answered primly.

"Yer kin hardly blame folks fer gettin' mixed up what ter call yer," Perry commented with his accustomed frankness. "I declare, you did give us Manorton folks quite a surprise."

Sitting alone on the wide second seat, Mrs. Van Besten quivered with distaste of the topic.

"I see William Van Besten on the street no longer ago'n yesterday," Perry continued, turning around from the front seat to look at her.

Mrs. Van Besten did not answer.

"Say, did yer know he'd been made chairman of the Executive Committee?" Perry asked. "That's the committee was appointed th' other night ter the town meetin', yer know. It's fer the big new buildin'—the what yer call it? The civil building."

"The new Civic Building," Sally suggested.

"That's it. The Civic Building. It's goin' ter be mighty fine they're tellin'. There's been a lot er talk in Kirton about who was to be chairman er the committee. William Van Besten, he got it. They say he warn't none too anxious for the job, neither, but they wouldn't take "no" from him. There was a hull lot er pow-wowin' 'bout how he was one er the leadin' citizens er Kirton, representative young business man an' all like that, yer know. Well, nobody can't deny but what William Van Besten's got the biggest store in Kirton." Old Perry glanced back at her again with some pity. "Yes, William Van



Besten's real well-to-do. Pity you'n him couldn't a got along together," he commented, reflectively.

Mrs. Van Besten felt stung finally to self-assertion. "That is a subject which I don't care to discuss with anyone, Mr. Herter," she said, emphatically, sitting erect in an assertion of dignity quite lost upon Perry.

"Just as you say," he agreed, affably. "'Taint anybody's business but yourn and hisn. That's what I always say." Refusing to accept rebuffs, he continued his cheerful sociability. Sally was glad to get away from him when finally he set her down on Kirton's Main Street.

"She's a terrible close-mouthed woman," he muttered discontentedly, as he drove on.

Sally drew her list of commissions from her shopping bag and studied it as she walked along. There were three dry goods shops in Kirton. Of course she could not go to Van Besten's. She had decided that matter before leaving home. Of course she could never enter William's store again.

That was a morning of petty aggravations. Sally sought in vain for what she wanted at the lesser shops. The salesmen had never heard of the particularly light and pleasant lining material for which she asked. She had always been able to find it at Van Besten's. She examined the stock of trimmings shown her with discontent. Mrs. Wynne would never be satisfied with any of these. "Can't you show me something better than these?" she asked, severely.



"I'm afraid not, ma'am," the clerk answered. "We never keep much of an assortment of trimmings. But I guess you can find what you want at Van Besten's."

"Thank you," said Sally, curtly.

She left the second shop in a state of exasperation. "I can't see why they leave William to do all the business in this town," she thought, crossly. "Why can't the others have a little business enterprise. What do they think they're keeping shop for, I wonder?" Her step quite lost its usual alert springiness as she loitered along considering what to do. It certainly was very unpleasant to feel condemned to second rate shops all the rest of one's days. A sense of injury swelled in Sally's heart and something very like a renewal of wrath against William. The Kirton acquaintances to whom she bowed in a preoccupied way, thought Sally Van Besten was looking very well. Was it the possibility of encountering William in the Kirton ways that had influenced her to make so careful a toilet that morning? A certain tidy trimness was characteristic of Sally; but nothing could have been more becoming than the crisp, freshly laundered blue summer gown, and the shady black hat. "How nice you look," Annie had commented. "I hope you won't get caught in a shower and spoil your best hat."

As she drew near the big corner show window of Van Besten's, Sally quickened her pace and



trod the pavement more vigorously. "Why shouldn't I buy things there just the same as I would anywhere else?" she demanded of herself, fighting down her instinct against going. "It's just foolishness to feel that I've always got to keep away from a public place like a great big store." But she wavered at Van Besten's wide open door. Her practical sense took swift note of the future, the endless needs of customers which, as she had just demonstrated, only Van Besten's, of Kirton shops, could supply. "It's ever so much more sensible to go there straightforwardly than it is to keep away." Sally always prided herself upon good sense. "It's going to be so dreadfully inconvenient always to keep away. It isn't likely I'll see him anyway. He hardly ever does wait on people."

Sally entered the shop. A curious distaste for herself seized her as she did so. She saw William almost immediately, and she summoned all her pride, all her will, not to be submerged in confusion.

William Van Besten saw his wife as she perceived him. His astonishment expressed itself in a moment's immobility. Then he came forward.

"Sally!"

Sally perceived an expectancy which it became her immediate business to quench. "Good morning, William," she said, primly. "Have you any lustrine?"



"Any what?" asked William, still looking eagerly, hopefully at her.

"Lustrine," Sally repeated in a business-like manner. "Dress lining," she explained tolerantly.

"I don't know," William answered, in a bewildered way quite at variance with his usual manner. His blue-gray eyes questioned her. Sally glanced into them and then hurriedly away. She fumbled with her shopping bag in an embarrassed way and pulled out her list. "I've quite a lot of things to buy." Scarcely knowing what she did, she held out the list.

William accepted it mechanically and glanced at it. "Four dozen button moulds," he read aloud, but went no further. His long, firm fingers took to folding up the bit of paper, matching the edges meticulously while still he looked at Sally.

Sally's head throbbed with a conflict of impulses. She was uneasily conscious that curious eyes were probably watching her and William. It seemed highly important to demonstrate that she was here purely for business reasons. "I had to come up to get a lot of things for my customers," she explained. He felt her voice, her manner, subtly repellent.

William straightened his broad shoulders. His expression changed as he handed back her list. "You want linings, I believe. Step this way, please." He was the merchant now, perfunctorily



courteous. The hurt her attitude had inflicted upon him, came quickly back upon her because he treated her as he might have treated any other customer.

"Mr. Van Besten?" said a clerk, approaching deferentially.

"What is it?" he asked.

"There's a man waiting to see you, sir. Here's his card."

William glanced at the card. "Show him into my office. I'll be there shortly." He turned back to his wife, but she was engrossed, so he bowed ceremoniously and went away.

Sally finished her business and left the store. "I needn't have minded going," she reflected, sorely. "It was nothing to him. He doesn't care at all." She had been wont to consider William Van Besten as a factor, of importance to be sure, but primarily a factor, in her own life. Somehow that visit to the opulent Van Besten store had emphasized to her that William possessed an independent life of his own, stocked with interests with which she had nothing whatever to do.

As for William, the drummer whom he found waiting in his office thought him singularly absent-minded and himself dismissed somewhat abruptly. Mr. Van Besten was for the moment unable to concentrate his attention upon the exigencies of next fall's trade. Although he sat doggedly at his desk until the hour for closing the store, he accomplished nothing more than going



over and over again every detail of Sally's appearance, her manner, her few commonplace words. He had known, of course, that sometime the encounter was sure to come. As he walked the Kirton street he had been subconsciously expectant of a buoyant, light-stepping figure, a fresh, vigorous countenance with hazel eyes. When he appeared most engrossed in the details of his business, he was sometimes engaged in a mental interview quite disconnected with it, in which a calm, kind, logical setting forth of his views proved triumphantly convincing to feminine understanding. His brief interview with Sally had been very different from that. It had revived the sting of mortification and left him to a drearier loneliness.



## CHAPTER IV

### THE BLACK SHEEP COME TO THE RESCUE

THE pleasant distant croon of Joe Haselton's paper mill reached the village street like the faraway hum of a gigantic bumble bee. A strip of turf, bordered by maple trees, ran through the middle of Manorton. On the light railing by which it was enclosed, the Manorton boys loved to sit and swing their heels while concocting fun and mischief. Over their heads, in just another merry and ragged line, English sparrows perched on the telegraph wires. The long double row of maple trees was the glory of Manorton, whether throwing out coral buds in the spring; or relieving with their deep summergreen eyes tired with the sun-glare of the road; or when the leaves turned to a gold that made Manorton sunshiny even on a cloudy day; or with fine stripped symmetry revealed against a winter sky; or when clad in a fairyland beauty of white ermine or sparkling crystal. Late every afternoon the unpaved grass-bordered footwalk was populous for a little while at mail time. At this morning hour most of the



villagers were busy indoors and the street almost deserted. Two idlers, however, Harlan Morgan and Allen Mackenzie, might be seen, as at almost any hour of the day. They touched their hats to Mrs. Van Besten as they sauntered past the window where she sat sewing.

Sally returned a frigid, disapproving bow.

The black sheep of Manorton cared very little whether Sally Van Besten approved of them or not, and yet the chilling recollection of her bow was still present with them as they settled themselves in their usual places on the hotel veranda.

"Censorious little cat—" Harlan Morgan muttered lazily.

Allen Mackenzie nodded agreement. "Plenty of ginger in her makeup, I reckon. Just as well for Van Besten, maybe, that they concluded to stay apart."

The two had not always been Manorton's black sheep. Once, worth while achievement had been expected of them. Nowadays, Harlan Morgan glanced neither to right nor left as he went along, but shunned recognition because it hurt him to read judgment in other people's eyes. As his thick dark hair grew grizzled, he no longer held his head with the buoyancy of his untested youth. It drooped forward and his shoulders, too, were bowed under the heavy, invisible load of the disappointing years. Allen Mackenzie, although aware that he, too, was a failure, went his way more jauntily. He might be a dead beat, but he



never forgot or failed to be consoled by the fact that he was also a gentleman.

"I wonder what keeps taking those two men over to Thompson's?" Mrs. Haselton said.

"Those poor children," Sally said, compassionately.

Philip Thompson had been another of Manorton's black sheep. When his substance had been squandered in unwise living, he went away abruptly from Manorton and left his three motherless children and his creditors to shift for themselves. Millie did her ignorant, girlish best, but the neighbors believed that the three often went hungry. Perhaps in their would-be helpfulness the neighbors lacked tact. Millie rebuffed aid and resented interference. Therefore her neighbors charitably bestowed slabs of bread and butter and triangles of pie upon the always hungry Thompson boys, but let Millie severely alone. For a time she was a noisy, harum-scarum, hoyden, with two long pig-tails hanging down her back. Then a transformation came. The pig-tails gave place to a bright, alluring coil of brown hair crowning her shapely head. About this time her disapproving acquaintance, the loungers at the hotel, and Mrs. Van Besten in her window, noticed Morris Stetson, son of the proprietor of the hotel and his father's assistant, often at Millie's side, waiting for her at the foot of the school-house hill. They were more and more together, immeshed in happy sensation, heedless of watchful eyes. Sally



found them far more interesting than the black sheep.

Millie's father had been a crony of the black sheep.

"That's beginning to look serious, ain't it?" Morgan commented.

"I hope it is serious," Allen Mackenzie said soberly. "Morris is a pretty good young fellow, I reckon, and that girl must have a rough time of it at home."

"Jove! How could Phil go off and leave those three helpless kids to shift for themselves?" ejaculated Morgan.

"Phil never meant to desert them. I don't think it of him for a minute." Mr. Mackenzie looked reproachfully at his friend. "See here, Harl, you and I have had some royal times with old Phil, and don't you forget. I wish I was able to do something for his children now."

The two men smoked in reminiscent silence. Presently Mr. Mackenzie rose. "Guess I'll go over and brouse around among Phil's books."

He found Millie in an unhappy heap on a very rickety lounge. "Why, my dear child, I beg your pardon!" he exclaimed with his accustomed courtesy, so much more accentuated than that of any one else in Manorton, and charming always to a woman, even to so young a woman as Millie Thompson. "What is the matter, Millie? Hadn't you better tell your old Uncle Al?" he asked, with ingratiating sympathy.



Millie raised a pretty flushed face from the sofa pillows and gave him a wavering smile. "Uncle Al, isn't it horrible to be poor and not able to get things that you really ought to have?"

"It certainly is," he answered, emphatically.

Millie sat up and clenched her hands fiercely. "Uncle Al, I don't think the Lord ought to send people into the world and never provide for them." She faced him tragically.

Mr. Mackenzie raised both hands in deprecation. "My dear, I beg of you, don't make me responsible for the Lord's unaccountable doings."

Millie laughed.

His book forgotten, Mr. Mackenzie helped himself to a chair. "Why is it so particularly unpleasant at the present moment to be poor?" he asked.

Millie hesitated. Then she looked frankly across at him. "Stella Brownson's come home from boarding school, and she's going to have a party. A real party, dancing, you know. There's going to be music from Kirton and everything. It's going to be perfectly lovely and I'm crazy to go, but I can't."

"Why can't you go?"

"Because I haven't any dress I could possibly wear." For an instant, Millie buried her face in the sofa pillow again. All the imperious craving of youth for the lovely, the seemly, tugged at her heart. Sally Van Besten had noticed her pitiful effort at self-adornment, her unskilled readjust-



ments of garments past righting; and both the woman and the dressmaker had longed to go to the rescue.

"Oh, well, I can't go," Millie sighed. "That's all there is about it. I told Morris I'd go if I could, but I'll have to let him know so that he can ask some other girl."

At the mention of Morris, Mr. Mackenzie regarded her thoughtfully, and she colored under his gaze. Mr. Mackenzie's long fingers stole into his trousers' pocket, and drew out some very small change, and regarded it with contempt.

Millie uttered a gasp of protest. "Oh, no, you mustn't think of that, Uncle Al! You know I couldn't let you. Why, I'd never have any comfort telling you things again."

Mr. Mackenzie thrust the coins back into his pocket. "My dear, you needn't worry." He considered. "So Morris wants to take you, does he?"

"Couldn't you scare up some of your mother's old finery?" he suggested after a pause. "She used to have lots of pretty things."

"Yes, but I don't know how to fix them," Millie said sadly. "Some girls might, but nobody ever showed me how to do things."

"Can't you ask some woman to help you?"

"No, I can't," Millie answered, decidedly. "People don't approve of me."

"That's strange. They don't approve of me either," Mr. Mackenzie said affably. "But I



really can't see why they don't approve of you. I do." Suddenly he sat up and slapped the arm of his chair. "See here, Millie, you have your mother's sewing machine, haven't you?"

"Yes." Millie looked up. "I found some lovely pink and white stuff in a trunk up garret."

"That's it. You fetch it down." He went briskly away to find Harlan Morgan. Mr. Morgan, listening at first with the listless air of one whose time is valueless, grew animated in dismay. "See here, Al, I'm no dressmaker," he said. "Any gown you and I fabricate will be so original that poor child won't want to wear it."

"No, it won't. We'll buy a pattern." Mr. Mackenzie insisted. "What's the reason two able-bodied men, one of them an artist, and a bright girl, and a sewing machine, can't manufacture one single dress. Come along and don't be chicken-hearted."

Harlan Morgan rose lazily. "I must say I admire your confidence. You always were a versatile chap."

"I've sometimes thought that I ought to have been a woman," the other said, reflectively. "Then some foolish fellow would have been impressed with my charm, that same versatility you know, and married me, and never found out how intrinsically worthless I am. Come along, Harl."

The two spent the remainder of the day at the Thompson's, and the next day and the next.



Their voices mingled with Millie's anxious tones, at moments raised high in discussion, drifted out of the side windows across the Haselton yard to Sally in her corner chamber.

Now if William Van Besten had not been called upon to fill his business niche and to respond to the various demands made upon him by the community to which he belonged, he would have sought peace in isolation. Sally, his wife, felt more strongly the pull to go out to help, and to feel, with her kind. She felt it the more as time went on and William made no overtures.

Sally's perceptions were quick. The whir of the sewing machine came faintly to her. Then Millie's voice with a note of dismay. "Oh, Uncle Al, that isn't very straight!"

Poor little ill-equipped Millie! Was it possible that in all Manorton only those two worthless do-noughts had found a way to make needed aid acceptable? Sally's heart smote her. She cast aside her own work and went quickly downstairs. "They'll probably think I'm an awful meddler."

The bell at one side of the Thompson's dingy front door was broken and refused to ring. Sally knocked gently, then feeling like a guilty intruder, opened the door and walked to the sitting-room. The three there were too deep in perplexity to heed her coming.

Sally's alert and energetic figure paused on the threshold and her fresh lips parted in an involuntary smile. Millie was trying the dress.



Flushed and greatly troubled, she was trying valiantly to conceal her misgivings. Harlan Morgan, sitting on the edge of the table, his long legs dangling to the floor, surveyed his handiwork unhappily. "I wish I knew what's the matter with the darned thing," he said.

Allen Mackenzie, with a blue gingham apron tied about his waist, the front of his coat glittering with pins and needles, sat before the sewing machine. "We must keep on trying until we get it right," he insisted with would-be cheer.

"You look very industrious," said Mrs. Van Besten at the door, and the three started with the guilt of conspirators. Sally surveyed the confusion of scraps and sewing implements, the broadcast gleam of pins.

"Oh, Miss Sally!" Then Millie stopped short in dismay at her own inadvertence. In her little girl days she had known her neighbor as Miss Sally, and she had almost forgotten the Van Besten wedding. She hurried on to hide her confusion. "They're trying to make me a dress so that I can go to Stella Brownson's party. It's awfully kind of them, but I'm afraid we'll have to give it up. You won't tell anybody, will you? Please don't."

"Never! Trust me," said Sally, emphatically. "What lovely stuff. I'll help you."

"Oh, no, you're so busy. I couldn't let you do it unless I was able to pay." Millie's pride was stung. She flushed, her lips quivered. She



hated to feel that her ungraciousness must give offence.

But Sally Van Besten understood. The men watching her and Millie saw the warm sympathy in her hazel eyes and liked her immensely. Impulsively she caught Millie by the shoulders and looked down into her face.

"See here, Millie, I know exactly how you feel, but you mustn't be foolish. I'd love to do it. If you're so awfully proud, why then pay me if you want to. Come over and help me some day. There are lots of things you could do. We'll just change off work, don't you see?"

Millie wavered. Sally examined the material. "You couldn't find anything as pretty as that in the shops nowadays," she said, admiringly. Then Millie succumbed to the allurements of a real party dress made by a real first class dressmaker. The two masculine tyros in dressmaking sighed with relief as they joyfully resigned their task to more competent hands. Mrs. Van Besten promptly took command of the situation. "Stand over there, Millie, and let me have a look at it," she said. "It's really astonishing how well you men have done," and the black sheep exchanged pleased glances. "I see exactly what it needs," Sally went on. "Those sleeves aren't set in right, that's all. Mr. Morgan, the reason that skirt hangs crooked, is because you've put the front breadths in the back and the back breadths in the front. Don't you see?" She smiled at



his mortified look. "That's easily changed. Take it off, Millie, please, and let me have it."

"I suppose we'd better get out and leave you a clear field." Mr. Mackenzie spoke regretfully as he untied his gingham apron. Both he and his friend showed such hearty interest in the pink and white gown that Sally's heart was touched.

"Oh, no indeed, you mustn't desert us!" she said. "We must all help along. Mr. Morgan, would you just as soon rip out those sleeves? Mr. Mackenzie, I'll have these breadths ready for you to stitch on the machine in a few minutes."

The four fell to work in a happy sociability which Harlan Morgan and Allen Mackenzie, long unused to cheery feminine companionship, found very delightful.

On the evening of the Brownson's party, Mrs. Van Besten met Mr. Morgan and Mr. Mackenzie on the Thompson's steps and the three regarded each other with friendly understanding. "I thought I'd run over and see if I could help her dress," Sally explained, and leaving them in the hall, ran upstairs to Millie.

The men sat down and waited expectantly. Allen Mackenzie smiled quizzically. "Do you know, Harl, I'm nervous, positively nervous," he confessed; and recognized fellow-feeling in his friend, although Harlan Morgan merely shrugged his shoulders. The two sat listening. When they heard voices, steps, rustling draperies on the stairs, Morgan thumped



down his pipe. "She's coming," he announced unnecessarily.

In a moment a lovely vision hesitated in the doorway, then walked forward into the circle of lamplight. A charming elation, born of girlish vanity long pitifully starved, now happily appeased, made Millie radiant. She looked like a flower in her filmy pink and white. Her bare white neck and arms made tender appeal in their slender immaturity. Her happy eyes were very bright. As they looked upon her the tired eyes of the two old men brightened. Shining reminiscences of their own dead youth made their worn faces tender and wistful.

Millie looked back at them with a new and charming coquetry. "Don't you think it's pretty?" She glanced gratefully from one to the other, and at Sally Van Besten. "Oh, you've all been so lovely and kind to me! If it hadn't been for you, I couldn't possibly have gone."

A knock sounded on the front door. "There's Morris," Millie cried excitedly, and flew to admit him. Then Sally Van Besten wrapped her own white silk shawl about the girl's shoulders. "You look lovely," she whispered. "Have a good time."

Impetuously, Millie kissed her. Then the girl gave her hand to Mr. Morgan, to Uncle Al. "Good-night! Good-night!" Then she turned to the young man watching her so intently. "Come on, Morris," she bade, with the gay



imperiousness of a little queen who had just found her sceptre. The boy followed her as the steel follows the magnet.

With an agreeable sense of social rehabilitation, Mr. Morgan and Mr. Mackenzie escorted Mrs. Van Besten to her gate.

"She's all right," Allen Mackenzie said when they had seen the door close behind her. "She's all right!"

"By Jove! I like her pluck, quitting the fellow when she found out he wasn't what she thought him," Harlan said emphatically.

Sally Van Besten had in a measure comforted their sore sensibilities and made them feel less barred outside the staid and ponderous respectability of the village. She had proved herself frank and kindly. Henceforth, whatever other people might say of her, these two were her loyal friends.

Still with that delightful unaccustomed glow of satisfactory achievement warming their sluggish blood, the two men settled down for a smoke on their favorite end of the hotel veranda.

"She's a good looker, all right," Mr. Morgan said, referring to Millie Thompson with something like exulting paternal pride. "I bet there won't be a prettier girl there this evening."

"There won't. Nor a prettier dress either. Some of the other girls' dresses will have cost more," Mr. Mackenzie conceded, "but they won't look any better, I'll venture to wager."



Far down the village street they could see two unusual lights from the big Japanese lanterns hung over Mrs. Brownson's gate. Even at this distance, the men sensed something of the gay excitement of the party.

"Wonder what time that child's going to get home?" Mr. Mackenzie said. "See here, Harl, it doesn't seem quite the thing for a young girl like Millie to be coming home with a young fellow any time of night and nobody on hand to see that she gets in all right. Not a soul in that house but two small boys, and they're fast asleep."

"No more it isn't," the other said.

"What do you say? Shall we sit up for her? We might go over presently and be there when she comes."

"I'd just as soon," Mr. Morgan acquiesced indolently.

For a long time they sat and smoked. Then Harlan Morgan fell silent and appeared to grow extraordinarily absentminded. He held his pipe suspended and shuffled his feet uneasily. At last he rose slowly and went into the barroom. Mr. Mackenzie rose too. "Better not," he said, almost as though in soliloquy, but he followed his friend up to the bar.

"Give me another," Harlan Morgan demanded.

Allen Mackenzie silently shoved back his glass to be refilled.

"It's getting cold out there on the veranda."

Mr. Stetson gave them a keen look as they went



out of the barroom. "Trouble brewing," he said to himself, laconically. "Well, its getting to be about time."

As the two men settled down again in their arm chairs, they were filled with pleasant consciousness of their meritorious attitude toward Phil's girl. They told each other that there wasn't anything they wouldn't do for Phil's girl. They would sit up all night for her before they would have her coming home unwelcomed, unguarded. They felt that the apples of the Hesperides hung within reach of her eager young fingers, and that they must help her to grasp them.

After awhile Harlan Morgan's hand began to twitch as it lay on the arm of his chair. Desire glowed under his heavy eyelids.

"I'm going to have another drink." He spoke truculently, but Allen Mackenzie offered no opposition. All the evening they lurched in and out of the bar-room. Allen Mackenzie became dimly aware of shadowy figures in the street and his half forgotten purpose came back to him. "Come, Harl. Time to go now. Time to go meet Millie."

The other did not move.

"Come along. What's the matter with you? It's time, I tell you."

"Let me alone," the other growled, but he rose unsteadily.

Supporting each other, proceeding gingerly, as though on dangerous ice, the two shuffled across



the veranda to the steps. There Harlan Morgan flung his arms around a pillar of the veranda and refused to be detached. "Let go! Let me 'lone! I'm not going, I tell you. I can't go. You can't go. You're drunk. Go to bed, man. You're drunk, I tell you!"

The miasma of defeat once more enveloped them. To-morrow the old sore self-contempt and humiliation would bring back the old inertia.

Mr. Stetson woke in the night and listened to tell-tale dragging steps now pausing, then shuffling on again on a difficult way upstairs. "Just as I thought it was going to be," he soliloquized as he turned on his pillow.



## CHAPTER V

### AN IMPORTANT ANNOUNCEMENT

A WAIL from her small nephew drew Sally to the kitchen. Mrs. Haselton, clothed in motherly severity, was vigorously shaking little Joe.

"You naughty, naughty boy!" she said, "I don't know what I am going to do with you."

Joe's red lips, his round cheeks, were encrusted with a sticky glaze. His baby chin quivered pathetically at his mother's unkindly touch. His large blue eyes were suddenly drenched in grief.

Sally, who adored him, regarded Annie reproachfully. "What has he done?" she asked.

"Done! the naughty boy!" Annie turned to her. "Why when I was down cellar just now, he dragged a chair over to the cupboard and climbed up and helped himself to the molasses jar. Look at him! I believe he's drunk a pint of it."

"It won't hurt him, I guess," Sally said, soothingly. In appeal from his mother's unkindness, little Joe held out the arms of one who longed for comfort. He sobbed. Big round crystal tears hung on his long lashes. His curly



head drooped under his mother's condemnation. In spite of the obvious exigency of discipline, Sally could not resist him. She knelt down and put her arm around him. "Joe, how could you be so naughty?" she rebuked caressingly.

"I ought to spank him," his mother said energetically.

"Oh, Annie, he's only a baby," Sally expostulated.

"You'd just spoil that child if you had your way," his mother complained, but there was an undercurrent of affectionate amusement in her voice.

"Come along, Joe, and let Aunt Sally wash off the stickiness." Surrendering weakly to his baby charm, Sally gathered him up. His big tears vanished miraculously. So did all signs of contrition as Joe flung his short arms around this comforting Aunt Sally and peeped inquiringly at his mother through his curls.

Later, Mrs. Haselton mentioned the incident to her husband. "Sally's so fond of children. She ought to have her own babies."

"So she ought, and I wish she had 'em," Joseph said. "I declare, Annie, I don't understand why that had to go wrong. It was the last thing anybody'd ever have expected." Sally's courageous self-assertion, her professional triumphs, inspired him with brotherly admiration.

Sally went away upstairs to her work and sat down in her sewing chair by the window. She



heard the Thompson's front door slam and the Thompson's rickety gate swing on its groaning hinges, and she looked out and nodded response to Millie's impetuous wave of the hand. "Oh, Sally, I'm coming to see you," Millie called. Sally bent over her sewing again, and listened expectantly for the house door to open and familiar quick steps on the stairs, and she looked up, smiling affectionately, when the girl appeared. How happy Millie looked. How delightfully, unreservedly happy. She came into the room like a spring breeze. In her clear young eyes, in the curves of her red lips lay mysterious, inexpressible delight.

"Good morning, Sally. Isn't it just the loveliest day? I've swept the sitting-room, and I've made ginger cookies for tea, and I simply couldn't stay in the house and work another minute. I'm so restless." She fluttered around the room inconsequently and picked up a scrap of serge from the carpet. "Is this Mrs. Brownson's new suit? How's she going to have it made?" But she scarcely heeded Sally's answer.

"What is the matter with you this morning?" Sally asked, with a kind of merry understanding. "Why don't you sit down, child? I never saw such an uneasy mortal."

Millie laughed, a gay little nervous trill. She hesitated by Sally's dresser, and picked up one small article after another, then laid it back in place. She came lightly, swiftly, across the room



and threw herself down on the floor at Sally's feet and clasped her in impetuous arms, and buried her face in Sally's lap. She was quite still for a moment, and then she glanced up. "I'm so happy! So happy!" she whispered with a fervor that brought unexpected tears to her eyes. She drove them away with a smile at her own folly.

Sally Van Besten's heart warmed to the frank girlish appeal for sympathy. She leaned forward and took Millie's face between her two soft, firm palms and kissed it. "I'm so glad, dear," she said heartily.

Still in the grip of her wonderful, beautiful news, Millie laid her head down again for an instant on Sally's knee. When she looked up again, rich lovely color floated over her pretty quivering face, suffusing even her neck, her delicate ears; but Millie did not care. She did not even know that she was blushing.

"I'm engaged," she said dramatically, and hugged Sally again in pure exuberance of joy. She felt as one entering the portals of life, dazzled, yet suddenly made wise by the wonder revealed. She looked back with affectionate contempt upon the little girl self she had been yesterday. To-day she was a woman engaged to be married. "It seems wonderful," she said softly.

Millie had known other girls in the same case. The announcement of a friend's engagement had been interesting, but only as a historic fact. Now a great illumination had come to her. Now



she understood. "You've been so dear and kind. I wanted you to know first of all," she said.

Sally could not help kissing again the upturned face. "I am so glad," she repeated. "I am truly glad for you, Millie, dear. I'm sure Morris loves you dearly, and I think he will make you a good, devoted husband."

"Oh, I know that," Millie said proudly. "I hope I'll make him a good wife—satisfy him. He thinks I'm so much better than I am. I want to be all he thinks me." Her eager look softened to wistfulness. Once again, love was teaching its high lesson of humility. "Oh, you don't know how fine and manly he is! He doesn't talk much, but he really has such fine standards about things." Her dreamy eyes looked inward at her lover's nobility. "I never realized before," she went on thoughtfully, "what a responsibility it is to have a man care for you like that. It makes you feel as though you had so much more influence than you deserve. Why, really and truly, Morris thinks that my opinion about everything is important."

The glad, whole-hearted surrender moved Sally. Millie thought that she looked unhappy. The girl had never yet ventured any allusion to William Van Besten, but now her own joy and excitement made her bold. "Oh, I wish, I wish, you were as happy as I am," she said fervently. "How could that dreadful man treat you so? You!"

"What do you mean?" Sally drew away her



hands and sat up rigidly. She looked coldly self-possessed, but her hazel eyes flashed. The chill in her voice frightened Millie, rebuked her daring.

"Forgive me. I didn't mean to be impertinent," she said hurriedly. "Please don't be angry, Sally. Only I can't help hating him for making you unhappy. Everybody knows he wasn't worthy of you. They say you had a fortunate escape."

"What!" Sally appeared incredulous of what she heard.

"Please, please don't be angry," Millie pleaded. But Sally was angry. Unkind words trembled on her lips, and Millie watched her changed face in dismay.

"What can you possibly know about it? What right have you to set yourself up as judge of a man like Mr. Van Besten?" his wife demanded energetically.

Millie could not feel that she merited such severity. "All I know is what everybody says," she spoke with spirit, roused to self-defence.

"What does everybody say?" Sally's stern gaze required an answer.

"They say he's just as narrow-minded and disagreeable as he can be," Millie asserted. "Everybody knows that he's made lots of trouble on the Civic Building Committee up in Kirton. They'd put him off it if they could." She hesitated, then went on relentlessly. "They say he led a double life for years, and that he told you things after you were married because he was



afraid you'd find them out, and that's why you left him." Millie hesitated again. "There's a lady up there in Kirton that he's attentive to. And he's married to you! I think he's horrid, horrid! I can't help it if you are angry. I do think he's horrid."

"But it isn't true. It isn't true. People haven't any right to make up such things about him." Sally spoke hotly. She leaned forward impressively. "I tell you William Van Besten never did anything to be ashamed of in his whole life. He is a thoroughly upright and honorable man."

"Then why, why?" Millie began in a bewildered way.

"Hush," bade Sally. "Don't question me, Millie."

Millie sighed forlornly. She did not know what to say. She was ready to cry at the indiscretion into which her impulsiveness had hurried her. Mrs. Van Besten's bright needle flashed in and out. She knew that Millie loved her, and meant no harm. Suddenly Sallie took shame to herself because she had quenched the child's joyousness to-day of all days. "Never mind, Millie. I didn't mean to be cross. Don't think any more about my uncomfortable affairs. Only"—she spoke very earnestly—"you mustn't think such things of Mr. Van Besten. It isn't fair. It's horribly unjust. You must believe me when I tell you—they aren't true." Her look was troubled. Then it changed.



"Come," she said briskly. "Tell me about you and Morris. Oh, I thought you and he would soon reach an understanding. I've seen it coming a long time, you know. How pleased Mr. Morgan and Mr. Mackenzie will be!"

Millie brightened. "Yes, they will. Sally, I don't care what people say about those two, they've always been just as good and kind as they could to me."

Millie could not help brightening at recollection of her happiness, but she did so hesitatingly, as though perhaps she ought not. She sighed in sympathy for Sally which she dared not express.

Sally understood. "When is it to be, dear? Let me see." She held Millie off with a gentle pressure on the shoulder and looked her over with professional eyes. "You must give me plenty of notice, you know. I'm going to make your wedding dress. Millie, you'll look lovely in a wedding dress. I mean to take more pains with that dress than I ever did before. I tell you, Morris'll be proud of you."

Millie hugged her again in happy gratitude, and began to tell her more about Morris, the inexhaustible Morris. Sally listened kindly, genially, to the girlish babble of sweet, strange, wonderful trifles, conscious all the time of a corroding pain which she would not investigate until she was alone.

Millie went away at last. Then Sally dropped her work and sat in dreary thought. Little Joe rambled into the room but she did not heed him.



She was thinking of William, whom usually maiden instinct bade her try to keep out of mind because he had apparently shut her out of his life. She could not help wondering if he knew what people were saying of him; and it stung her to realize the grim humor that he must perceive between the truth and the report. She had never dreamed that her heedless course would bring scandal upon him, and yet it was not strange that it had done so. Of course it must be all scandal. A moment of sharp misgiving hurt Sally. She did not want to think less well of William. How could she clear his reputation? Tell the truth? She cringed at the thought.

She was suddenly conscious of little Joe's guilty silence. He greeted her startled glance with a crow of mingled mischief and consternation from the farthest corner of the room where, sitting in an entanglement of braids, he was creating havoc with the trimmings of Mrs. Brownson's gown. Tragic thoughts fled as Sally sprang to rescue. "Oh, Joe, what in the world are you doing? You mustn't ever, ever, touch Aunt Sally's things. Stop! Stop! Keep your little hands still till I can unwind that."

Calmly regardless of his mischief, Joe, well knowing his power, clasped Aunt Sally around the neck as she bent over him. He held her close with all the might of his short, plump arms, and Sally yielded to the sweet baby roughness, and kissed instead of shaking him. "Naughty



boy, see how you've mussed all poor Aunt Sally's trimmings!" She spoke reproachfully, and Joe pressed sweet, moist, propitiating kisses on her face.

She loved his confident appeal. She loved the feeling of his warm heavy little body in her arms, against her breast. Her heart swelled with a great unappeasable yearning as she clasped him. Little Joe looked up into her face wonderingly feeling something unusual in her tight embrace.

Presently she sent him off to his mother and closed her door. She felt too nervous, too wretched to go back at once to her work. A thought struck her. Standing on a chair, she lifted down a pasteboard box from the topmost shelf of her closet. She set it upon her bed and opened it, and unfolded many wrappings of white tissue paper. Her face was very sad, very wistful, as she lifted out her wedding dress and shook out its rich shimmering folds. A beautiful dress, and everybody had told her that it was becoming. Brides usually looked pale, they said. She had not looked pale. Sally started back from the bed, for a great tear had splashed down on the fair satin. She looked down at the wet blotch, sore at heart. "I meant to be a good wife." She stood going over and over again in her mind all that Millie had said. Could it be that William was beginning to care for someone else? If so, he ought to know that his wife would never assert her barren claim.



## CHAPTER VI

### THE JUDGE'S OPINION

A HORRID smarting sense of her own defencelessness against idle humiliating gossip stayed with Sally. She could not drive it away. The horrid things said of William were not true. She said passionately to herself that they were not true, and yet she could not keep from wondering from what possible germ of truth they might have sprung. An inquisitive world inclined to think the worst that it could. There were spiteful people, too, people perhaps whom William had irritated. She knew exactly how he would be on the Executive Committee, how he would never try to conciliate individuals, but would consider only what it was really best and right to do.

Millie Thompson, who was to be married in a few weeks, came one morning for a fitting of her wedding dress. She was in a flutter of pleasure and gratitude over the sheer, dainty gown, simple and inexpensive as to material, yet exquisitely bride-like. Sally admired and sympathized with unselfish pleasure, and gave her best



attention and spared herself no trouble. When the fitting was over Millie sat down and sewed industriously for an hour or so, and then ran away to meet an important engagement with Morris Stetson.

Sally worked away with the best will in the world, but a bitterness lay on her spirit. She did not grudge Millie a scrap of her radiant happiness, but it made her feel that she sorely wanted to be happy herself. She did not want to be merely a spectator all her life, to go on and on through the long years equipping other women for the thrilling issues of life, never meeting them herself. She demanded participation in the feast. Sally startled herself by a long impatient sigh. "Oh, I'm so tired of sitting still!"

Out in the sunshiny yard, the matted autumnal grass was littered with twigs, with pale brown pods from the honey locust trees. Oval leaflets, like flakes of virgin gold, were drifting down from the branches. The masses of China asters and French marigolds in Mrs. Haselton's borders had begun to sprawl untidily, scorched here and there by the first frosts. From somewhere along the street came the pungent aroma of a bonfire. Somebody was burning the raked up autumn leaves. She could hear the crackle of the flame.

It became intolerable to sit still any longer under her burden of dissatisfactions. The spirit of her home-cleaning ancestresses came upon Sally. For generation after generation it had



been their habit twice a year to ferret out every bit of dust and corruption from their domain and to reduce it indoors and out to spotless order. In the spirit of her inheritance, Sally abandoned her dressmaking and descended to clean the dooryard. Presently Mrs. Haselton saw her with loose old gloves drawn over her white hands—Sally was a bit vain of her hands,—equipped with a brush broom and a rake, energetically dragging forth the debris collected in a fence corner. Mrs. Haselton gave herself brief intermission from the kitchen and went out to remonstrate.

“Sally, why on earth do you do that? Why don't you leave it for Joe?”

“I like to do it.” Sally was flushed with her exertions. She straightened herself and drew a long breath. With a gurgle of delight, little Joe bestrode the long rake handle and galloped off. “You little rogue, bring that rake straight back,” she called, and started in merry pursuit.

Mrs. Haselton stood breathing in the sparkling autumn air. “Well, I suppose I must go in and look at my biscuits. They're in the oven.” She turned reluctantly toward the house. Then she called from the kitchen door, “Oh, Sally, there comes Billy O. Stickles. Will you see him for me, please? I want a box of baking powder, and some nutmegs, and get some sweet potatoes and anything else that seems nice.”

“All right, Annie,” Sally answered.

Progressing slowly along the village street, Billy



O. Stickles, with his wagon load of commodities, halted at the Haselton gate with a cheerful hail. "Whoop there! Sweet potatoes and Yankee notions!"

Sally dropped her broom and went to him. "Good morning, Billy. You may give me a peck of sweet potatoes," she began.

Billy was old and clumsy, and deliberate in pulling out and filling his measure.

"How's your folks this morning?" he inquired affably.

"Very well, thank you. What else have you got?" Sally pushed back her breeze blown hair from her warm brow and peered into the back of the peddler's cart.

Billy paused in extolling his wares to survey her with leisurely, unemotional approval. "There don't nobody need ter ask after your health," he commented. "I never see yer look better. Them mush melons is ten cent each. You got th' advantage of yer husband fer sure. Last time I seen William Van Besten I thought he was a lookin' terrible peaked. Folks is all talkin' about how bad he looks. He's got a miserable down in the mouth look ter him. An' he's growed thin. There ain't hardly no more to him than what there is ter his shadder."

"Let me see one of those nutmeg graters," Sally demanded in a hard voice.

Billy handed it down to her. "I guess that Civic Building Committe's give him no end er



bother. Some folks is terrible down on him fer the way he's been handlin' it."

"Mrs. Haselton wants a box of baking powder," said Sally.

There was no use trying to forget. When Billy O. had gone his way, Sally carried the brush broom and the rake back to the tool-house and went soberly upstairs to her room. The exhilaration of the morning had departed. She no longer felt any heart for cleaning dooryards. What could she do to extricate herself and William from this bondage? What could she best do for William? That had become the important question. For she perceived now that she had always regarded only one side of the situation—her own. She had selfishly ignored William's side. She felt eager to make him amends, only he must never know that she felt that way. She did not believe that vexations connected with the Civic Building were making him ill, unhappy, to a degree noticeable even to his indifferent acquaintance. There must be another cause. Perhaps he had come to care for somebody else, somebody who satisfied him better than she could ever have done. It was undeniably hard on a man to be married and yet unmarried. Could he be expected to live out his life without companionship, chained by a nominal bond? Once, the recollection of his probable discomfort in his big dreary house had given her an ignoble kind of gratification. She had wanted him to realize



what he had lost in her. But now she was filled with compassion and compunction. She felt a great desire to stand well in his eyes, to prove herself not utterly cold and selfish. Yes, she would take the blame upon herself, although the fault was not wholly hers. Why had he never come to her? A word, horrid to her, a word which she associated with unwholesome, unclassed people with whom she, Sally Haselton, could not possibly have anything in common, kept coming to her mind. Divorce. She and William might be divorced. Then he could marry that other woman. Perhaps, considering the circumstances, a legal separation without publicity could be effected. Sally knew herself ignorant of the law. She must ask some one. There was old Judge Burrall, up in Kirton, whom she had known slightly all her life. He was no longer in active practice, but his old clients still sought him upon occasion, and she felt sure that he would be willing to advise her for her family's sake. Or she might go to Mr. Horace Adams, who had an excellent reputation as a young lawyer of promise. But the thought of consulting him was repugnant, because he was a friend and contemporary of William's. It seemed easier to appeal to an old man like Judge Burrall. She nerved herself for any horrid experience, provided that it assured William's contentment. If divorce was the only way she would go through with it, whatever her family thought. The one intolerable thing would



be to remain a clog upon William. As she faced herself in the mirror, Sally's hazel eyes were brilliant with heroic determination. Then the red lips quivered. The eyes could no longer see their reflection in the glass.

Annie Haselton, running upstairs for something, looked in upon Sally in a friendly way, then paused in astonishment. Her cheerful look changed to dismay. "Sally, dear, what is the matter?" she asked solicitously.

For Sally was crying. Her tell-tale handkerchief, moist and crumpled, betrayed her. So did her face.

"Gracious, Annie, I didn't know you were there!" she exclaimed.

Annie advanced in subdued dismay. "What is it?"

"There's nothing the matter. Nothing whatever," Sally assured her crossly. "Gracious, Annie! Don't look so solemn. Can't I cry if I want to?"

"It's not a bit like you," Annie said.

"What of that?" Sally wiped her eyes resolutely and flung down the wet handkerchief. "Do you suppose there ever was a woman in the world who didn't cry sometime?" she demanded.

Annie was regarding the crisp white billows of Millie's wedding dress. The room was strewn with bits of the mull. "You poor dear girl," Annie said, with warm sympathy. "You never do give way. It's awfully good of you to make that dress. I know just how you must feel."



"No it isn't," Sally said aggressively. "I like to do it." It was very exasperating to feel that whatever she said or did not say, Annie would go on believing that she was crying sentimentally at thoughts recalled by the wedding dress. "Oh, Annie," she cried. "Thank you very much, but I do wish you wouldn't be sympathetic."

At which Annie left the room in some indignation.

In a few minutes, Sally came downstairs wearing her hat and jacket. "Do you want to take a walk with Aunt Sally, Joe?" she asked, and the boy galloped off for his hat. "I'm just going over to the postoffice to leave word for Perry to call for me in the morning." Sally explained. "Can I do anything for you up in Kirton?"

"No, thank you." Annie spoke in the reserved tone of displeasure, but at Sally's deprecating little look, she sweet-naturedly relented. "I'll have breakfast for you a little earlier," she promised amiably.

To Judge Burrall, reading a not exciting novel in his office sitting-room, life was for the moment rather stagnant. Usually he was well satisfied with its dispensations, secretly priding himself upon the sense and foresight with which he had withdrawn from his extensive Kirton practice, while still able to enjoy existence. Some business he retained to keep the days from dragging, and he loved his leisure and had resources to fill it.



The Judge was fond of considering himself a practical philosopher, a man withdrawn by his own will from the rushing current of workaday life to a quiet and pleasant cove whence he could look out on the affairs of other men and women with kind, wise tolerance, lending now and then a helpful hand. It is true that he sometimes happened to feel a trifle lonely, but then he bade himself remember how many cares and anxieties he had escaped by never marrying.

"What rubbish people write, and read," Judge Burrall soliloquized, laying down his book. He yawned. The house which he had built on the outskirts of Kirton, not far from William Van Besten's, was so quiet that the orange horns of the trumpet creeper, dropping on the floor of the porch, made sounding thuds. He heard the trolley stop at the corner, and the jangle of its bell as it started on again.

Sally Van Besten stepped off the trolley, and came in her alert quick-stepping way to the Judge's door. She gave a quick, resolute pull to the bell-knob, hoping fervently that she would find the Judge alone. Her heart beat so vehemently at the ordeal before her, that she thought she could hear it. The giant trumpet creeper draping the Judge's porch, drooped so low that she had to brush against its heavy red and orange clusters. The deep-roofed shingled cottage had an attractive, peaceful look.

The portly, elderly Judge himself opened the



door to his visitor. Urbanely courteous, he invited her to walk in. Sally had never before entered his house.

"I don't believe you remember me, Judge Burrall. I'm Mrs. Van Besten, Sally Haselton," she hastened to explain herself.

"Why, of course, of course," he responded heartily. "My dear young lady, I beg your pardon. I knew there was something familiar about you. It's the Haselton look." He gave her a hearty handshake. There was something composing to her in his big, masculine reserve, in the kindly expression of his strong-featured, rather florid face. He passed a strong, well-tended hand across his thin silvery hair.

"Judge Burrall, I've come to consult you professionally," Sally began precipitately.

"Yes," said the Judge serenely. "But first, my dear young lady, you must let me give you a glass of wine."

Sally did not want the wine, but somehow the Judge's urbanity made it seem rude, rough, to rush at once into business. So she docilely sipped her old port, and answered his courteous inquiries, and constrained herself to talk about affairs in general, and to postpone her own. She could not bear her gloves and took them off. Her jacket felt oppressive and she threw it back. The Judge's shrewd eyes under his gray thickets of eye-brows, noticed her suppressed excitement and admired her plucky surface composure.



"You wanted to consult me about something?" he asked finally.

"Yes, I do." Sally hesitated. "What I have to say is strictly confidential," she told him.

"That is a matter of course," the Judge said gravely. His genial sociability gave place to professional gravity—attentive, inquiring, impressive. He felt very kindly toward this attractive, clear-eyed young woman, whose independent bearing contradicted so oddly the feminine appeal of her troubled face. "What can I do for you, Mrs. Van Besten?"

Sally hesitated. "Perhaps you know that Mr. Van Besten and I are separated." She spoke in a low breathless way.

"So I have heard."

Everybody knew the horrid story.

"Judge Burrall, I want to ask—couldn't we—I mean isn't there any way of getting out of being married except by divorce?" She asked. "Under the circumstances, I mean, of course."

"Divorce is of course the only legal dissolution of the bond." The Judge thought it an unnecessary question, even for a woman, but he was patient with her feminine inconsequence. "To what circumstances do you refer?"

"You see, it isn't as though we ever had lived together," she said. "We separated on our wedding day just two or three hours after we were married."

"Do I understand that you desire a legal separation?" he asked.



"I don't want any horrid publicity if I can help it," she told him earnestly; "or to set people talking, or to see it in the papers, you know." She looked at him with hopeful, flattering appeal to his masculine wisdom.

"It is difficult to avoid some publicity in matters of this kind." The Judge rested his elbows on the arms of his chair, and laid the tips of his shapely fingers together. "Let me see. How long have you been married, Mrs. Van Besten? Three years. Is that possible? How time slips away to be sure!" He watched her sorrowful, averted face. He noticed the smooth, bright hair under her tasty hat, and the nervous little hand toying with the wineglass, and found this throbbing, live situation more interesting than the plot of his novel. "Why are you no longer content to go on as you have been doing all this time?" he asked. "Have there been any new developments in the situation recently?"

Sally colored hotly at the question. "I have come to think that it would be wiser to make the separation legal," she said in a low voice.

"Why?" the Judge asked gently. "Suppose you enlighten me, Mrs. Van Besten. To begin with, what was the original cause of trouble?"

Sally looked vaguely all around the room as though she were searching for the why herself. He saw her lips grow unsteady.

"Believe me that you can trust me. I can advise you so much more understandingly if



you'll make a clean breast of it." The Judge spoke persuasively. "Tell me."

He waited patiently, until his steady, expectant gaze summoned back her attention. Her resolute composure broke. Impulsively she screened her face with both hands. "Oh, don't ask me! I can't tell you. It seems too foolish, too trivial." She controlled herself, and took down her hands, and looked at him tragically. "It was all my fault."

"Yes?" The Judge's colorless, unshocked tone steadied her nerves. The admission was a relief to her. Pity, sympathy, her pride repelled but she quite longed to submit herself to this calm impartial judgment.

"Nobody believes that," she went on. "Everybody seems to think that it must have been his fault. But it wasn't. It was mine in the first place. That's why I think he ought not to have to go on bearing the consequences any longer. I think he ought to be set free."

"Has Mr. Van Besten intimated in any way that he desires to be set free?" the Judge asked.

"No, oh no. He never would."

"Yet you appear to be thinking of this for his sake rather than for your own."

"Yes, I am." She spoke proudly, enacting meanwhile a little mental drama in which William was to be forced to admire, to respect, to at least a faint renewal of regret. The Judge regarded her reflectively from under his bristling brows.



Impatient Sally thought that he was a great while making up his mind to say something, but the Judge was persuaded that he could not speak to much purpose just then. Perhaps he was keen enough to perceive her mood of rampant self-sacrifice for his desire seemed to be to secure her time for pause.

"Mrs. Van Besten, you must not let yourself act too hastily in this matter," he said finally. "You probably know that your husband has given dissatisfaction in some quarters in connection with our new Civic Building. Nobody can possibly accuse him of not acting in an upright and honorable manner," the Judge spoke in impersonal exposition, "but he may have been somewhat dogmatic in his methods. He has certainly antagonized some of his associates and they have said some rather harsh things of him."

"Yes, I know," Sally said. "It's very unjust."

"Probably it is. Now, Mrs. Van Besten, you can readily see that this is a particularly inopportune moment for calling public attention to your husband's unfortunate private affairs. On this account, it seems to me that you ought to defer the action you contemplate."

"But I thought he would be happier. Then he—he could marry again if he wished."

"Is there another woman in the case?"

Sally looked at him in mortified protest. "How should I know? It wouldn't be so very astonishing, I suppose. Don't misunderstand me,



Judge Burrall. Mr. Van Besten would never do anything dishonorable," she added quickly.

"You respect your husband," the Judge said quietly. "So do I. I've always had the greatest respect for that young man. This foolish gossip will pass by in time. It will pass by. Mrs. Van Besten, allow me to counsel an interview between you and your husband. Will you authorize me to see him, and try to arrange one?"

"Oh, no. Please don't think of it. I would much rather not. No." She spoke decidedly.

He did not persist. "You want my professional opinion. It is this. Take no steps at all for the present. Wait patiently a little longer. My dear Mrs. Van Besten, believe me, half the misery in this world is brought about by precipitancy. People will act before they have fully weighed the consequences of their acts."

"I suppose so," Sally admitted. She looked depressed.

"You must give me a chance to think this matter over. I promise to give it my best attention," he said encouragingly. "Do nothing rash. Wait."

Sally sighed. To wait was so much harder than to do something, anything. It was as though cold water had been thrown upon her heroic resolve to vindicate herself in William's eyes. She rose unsatisfied. "If you really think it would harm Mr. Van Besten to do anything now——"

"I do most assuredly," the Judge said decidedly.



He shook hands and went to the door with her. "Drop in whenever you like and we'll talk it over again," he said.

The brief, unexpected glimpse of young, restless longings had stirred in him a strong desire to help. He stood under the drooping trumpet creeper and watched her until she had disappeared in the trolley. Then he went thoughtfully back to his office and lighted a cigar. "But I wish she'd told me what it was all about," he muttered.



## CHAPTER VII

### WILLIAM'S HOLIDAY

A SABBATH-LIKE silence reigned in the Van Besten house. William yawned as he lay apathetically in his four poster bed and reflected drearily that this was Labor Day and that the store would be closed. What should he do with his holiday? He disliked the thought of it, and would have preferred the routine of every day. He tried in vain to prolong his morning nap. One of his cats stole upstairs and stood in the shadowy doorway of his chamber, arching her back and purring loudly in amiable reminder that it was past breakfast time. William rose and dressed and went down stairs. He stepped heavily about the kitchen, lighting the fire, filling the teakettle, preparing his breakfast in clumsy, masculine fashion. It was characteristic of William that he set the dining-room table carefully for himself, spreading the linen cloth neatly, and fetching a single plate and cup and saucer from the fine old china in the butler's pantry. It never occurred to him to save trouble



by breakfasting in the kitchen. His two yellow and white cats followed him about as he made his preparations. Perhaps they, too, hungered for human companionship. They rubbed against his legs and purred amiably up at him. Before he sat down, William filled a pudding dish with bread and milk and set it upon the kitchen hearth for them.

When he had finished his simple breakfast, he washed up the few dishes. It may be that he was less particular than Sally his wife would have been, that he forgot to brush up the crumbs under the table and the coffee pot remained on the back of the stove unemptied, but according to his masculine light, William was conscientious. The yellow cats sat up and watched him as they licked the milk from their whiskers with rough pink tongues.

When William had cleared away, he returned to the dining-room and examined critically the time-mellowed surface of the mahogany table that had replaced the table of oak. A hot dish had here and there inflicted a blur. William decided that the table needed rubbing up. He provided himself with linseed oil, which, with masculine disregard of the fitness of things, he poured into one of the best cups. He hunted out a soft tattered towel and set to work. The exercise afforded a kind of moral relief to the unrest which possessed him. The fine-grained wood responded to his rubbing with softly ruddy



gleams. It felt like satin to his finger-tips. He could see his countenance oddly distorted in its shining surface. "It's a beautiful table," William said aloud to himself. The table always made him think of Sally. Sally had wanted it and for Sally he had bought it and the fine old Heppelwhite chairs now ranged against the dining-room walls. He wished that she could see them, now that he had rubbed them all up. At the time of his marriage he had not been interested in antiques. He had known very little about them. Beginning with the andirons that Sally had wanted for the living-room fireplace, he had bought one article after another because it was old. Sally would like it. Some day she would come and then she would know what to do with it. His hope of his wife's coming had died long ago. He knew now that she would not come, but his interest in his collection persisted. His collection had enriched his mind with human lore and the atmosphere of his home with memories. He mused over the dead men and women who had once used them. They were a shadowy company hovering about his shut-up rooms. He felt strange sympathy for them, strange envy sometimes, because they had unravelled the mysterious coil of human life. They assuaged his loneliness. At first Sally had dominated the collection, but of late the collection had dominated William.

He was breathless and fatigued when he stopped



rubbing. William had not felt as strong as usual of late.

"There, I don't believe I can improve upon that." Gathering up the oil cup and towel, William stepped back and surveyed his work with satisfaction. He saw a nick in one of the massive legs and frowned slightly as he bent to examine it. "Some piece of carelessness for which there is no excuse. It can't be remedied."

William sat down and lifted an old mirror to his knees and gazed thoughtfully into its age-dimmed surface. He softly blew the dust from the dimpled cheeks of the Dutch cherubs. The old mirror had the fatigued look of an age-dimmed eye. William carried it into the parlor and set it on the long haircloth sofa. He wandered dreamily among his possessions. Among these waifs and strays of vanished homes which he had laboriously brought together. When would they be dispersed again?

The boisterous toot-tooting of a horn roused him from his musings. He could hear the thudding of an automobile. It stopped and in a minute he heard a clatter of steps, cautious laughter, ejaculations, chattering voices. The doorbell rang. He went to answer it. He was so deliberate that a young man of the party raised the horn to his lips and blew a peremptory blast.

"Now, Harry, don't. You might offend him." William heard as he opened the door. From a



party of four, a pretty-self-assured woman stepped forward as spokesman.

"Is this Mr. Van Besten?" she inquired, with an ingratiating smile. "

"It is," he said gravely.

"I do hope you'll forgive us for taking you by storm," she began volubly. "It's really outrageous of us, but we do so want to see your collection. We heard you had such a fine collection of antiques. Would you be so good as to let us see it? It's a great deal to ask, I know." She smiled coquettishly up into William's attentive eyes with a confidence that no man would find it in his heart to be churlish to her.

"Will you walk in?" he asked courteously; and the three ladies, the young man, did so with alacrity. Coming out of the September sunshine, they stood subdued, uncertain in the darkened parlor.

"Isn't it ghostly?" one of them whispered, but William overheard.

"I'll open the blinds," he said.

The sunshine streamed in, revealing unkindly the dust and defacements of William's collection. "I have not undertaken to arrange things yet," he explained. At present they are scattered all over the house just as it happens.

"Isn't it fascinating? My dear, will you look at these Heppelwhite chairs?" Their shrill, fulsome compliments rang through the rooms. The pretty leader of the expedition was interested



in the collection, but she was more interested in its sedate possessor. His passivity lured her to awaken some hint of admiration in him. She introduced herself and her companions and William bowed gravely to each.

"This is a genuine Sheraton. I found it in Albany." He laid his hand affectionately on a spindle-legged card table.

"It's too lovely for anything. Isabel, isn't this card table sweet?" Her tone was effusive, but she paid but little attention to the table.

"Oh, I wish you'd let me have those andirons! They're too delightful with those great brass heads." The speaker appealed to the others. "Won't they be just the thing for my big fireplace? Mr. Van Besten couldn't you be induced to part with them? I'll pay you anything in reason."

"The andirons are not for sale," said William. He disliked the pleading coquetry with which this impertinent girl looked at him. He wished that these intruders would go away. He disliked their glib way of appraising his treasures. He stood with bored patience while they exclaimed and admired.

They all shook hands with him, lingering at the door to thank him profusely for his somewhat grudging courtesy. Mrs. Webster turned back to him after she had said goodbye once. "My mother and I are always at home on Wednesday evening. We'd be so pleased to see you if you'd care to call."



"Thank you, but I seldom make calls," William said bluntly.

He was glad when they were gone, yet somehow they had dispelled serenity. Restlessly he wandered about the house. He went upstairs and opened one bed-room door after another and glanced into the dim, musty chambers. Then he went into his own room. On the high chill marble mantel stood two old-fashioned daguerrotypes in faded velvet cases, portraits of his dead father and mother. Between them, in a neat frame, stood a photograph of Sally, given him when they were engaged. With a hand resting on either side of the little row of pictures, William stood before the mantel for a long time. Then frowning defiance of untoward circumstance, he turned away and went downstairs.

He was making notes in his memorandum book with newspaper clippings and auction catalogues spread about him on the dining table, when he was interrupted by a knock on the side door. He opened it to Mr. Elbert Moore.

"Ah, Bert, walk in. Sit down," he said cordially.

Mr. Elbert Moore, his friend and contemporary, was a young hardware merchant. They had grown up together in the Kirton schools. Mr. Moore glanced at the papers strewn under the lamp.

"Hard at work, eh? Say, William, don't you get mighty lonesome here sometimes?"



"I'm used to being alone," William answered.

"You've been losing flesh," Mr. Moore commented candidly. "Are you feeling all right?"

"Pretty well." William Van Besten detested personal allusions. He fetched a box of cigars from the sideboard and held it out to his guest.

"Thanks, I don't mind if I do." The two men smoked and talked of business, of people they knew, in what William felt to be a warming sociability. He was glad to have his solitude thus invaded. The fact that Elbert Moore had cared enough for a chat with him to take the trouble to call made him unbend from his usual stiffness, grow genial.

It came about quite naturally for Mr. Moore to speak of the Civic Building. The two men were members of the Executive Committee which was superintending its erection, William as chairman. The citizens of Kirton were deeply interested in their fine new Civic Building, which they had been spurred to attain by an offer of half the necessary funds from a multi-millionaire. The appropriation for the other half had been fought by many, who grumbled against increased taxation and declared that Kirton had no need of so costly a public building. "There isn't enough public spirit in Kirton to raise a flagpole," said Mr. Moore. "Well, it ought not to be long now before we're through with our job."

William nodded.

"Strange how many delays we've had from



first to last. I tell you, folks are grumbling like the deuce because it isn't done and we in it long ago."

William settled back unconcernedly in his chair. "Grumbling is always to be expected. It is the chronic attitude of ignorant outsiders to wonder why things aren't managed differently."

"Well, it has taken a good deal longer than any of us expected," said Mr. Moore.

The two smoked, thinking of the delays that had beset them—delays on the part of contractors, constructors, unexpected strikes.

"Anything special to come up before the Committee next Thursday?" Mr. Moore asked the question in too casual a manner. Somehow his host felt a motive in it.

"We have to decide what we'll do about the interior decorations."

"That's so. Why it could be begun very soon, couldn't it? Have you any special plan in mind?"

"No," said William. "I suppose we'll receive bids."

"Oh, what's the use of going through all that again?" Mr. Moore spoke energetically. "It only means a lot more delay. I believe we'd get along just as well and a good deal quicker by engaging the services of a reliable firm."

A glance of comprehension rose to the surface in William Van Besten's eyes, then sank out of sight. His warm pleasant glow of friendliness cooled.



His friend was not seeking merely his companionship. He had brought along an axe to grind.

"Have another cigar, Bert," he said, pushing over the box.

Elbert Moore selected one in an absent-minded way. He was plainly not thinking of the cigar as he rolled it in his fingers. He seemed to overcome some reluctance before he spoke.

"See here, William, what about Ed's firm?"

"Moore & Andrus, up in Albany?"

"Yes. See here, William, since we've chanced to get on the subject—I don't mind mentioning to you—just between us, of course—that I'd be glad for them to have it."

He scrutinized William, whose expression gave no hint of opinion.

"They're doing splendidly, but of course it's a young firm yet. A job like this is what they want to give 'em impetus." William was attentive, but non-committal.

"Of course I wouldn't want them to lay a finger on it if they weren't thoroughly competent," Mr. Moore spoke warmly. "I'm as anxious as anybody to do whatever is going to give the best results."

"Of course, that's what we all have to consider," William said.

Mr. Moore told himself, with an irritation which he tried to hide, that if it had not been for his support, William Van Besten would probably never have been elected chairman of



the Executive Committee. He needn't act so aloof. People had to stand together in this world.

"But Ed those fellows up there would take a real personal interest in doing a first-rate job for Kirton. They'd do well by us. I'm sure they would."

"I don't doubt that," said William. "I understand they're making a very good reputation for themselves."

"Tip-top. Say, William, perhaps you could suggest them to the Committee on Thursday?"

William shook his head. "That isn't the way."

"How then?" Mr. Moore's voice was restive.

"I think we should proceed exactly as we have done in all the other decisions. Ask for competitive estimates—compare, study them, and then decide."

"Yes, but all that takes time. It takes such a lot of time," Mr. Moore expostulated. "I tell you, we've got to hurry things up. You've no idea how folks are grumbling."

"That can't be helped," William said decidedly. "We have no right to sacrifice anything to haste."

"We must do what you think is wisest, of course." With an effort, Mr. Moore cleared a frown from his brow. It seemed to him that William Van Besten was showing himself distinctly unfriendly, but delicacy forbade insistence. He was bitterly dissatisfied with himself for betraying eagerness when he had fully meant to content himself with the lightest suggestions.



The two talked no more about the Civic Building, but the subject had left a rankle. Constraint hung over them. When he had finished his cigar, Elbert Moore went away.

William, left alone, left his catalogues after awhile. He walked slowly around the house and stood at the front gate. Heavy sweetness floated over him from the syringo bushes, which his mother had planted when he was a little boy. The sweetness tantalized him, filled him with desire. In the thickets of the shrubbery he heard the sleepy love twitter of birds. Happy, mated birds. William Van Besten drew in a long breath. His hand, resting on top of the iron gate, twitched.

He looked toward Kirton. Over Kirton hung a soft luminosity from the lights in the streets, in the homes. Over there, his eyes turned toward the spot, he knew a quiet little house where one was expectant, hopeful, of his coming. There soft hands were eager to grasp his hands. Standing there solitary, in the throbbing fragrance of the summer night, William Van Besten closed his eyes dreamily, and in his mental vision he saw a face—a pretty, tender face—grow eager in welcome. Behind him lay his desolate, lonely house. The discord Elbert Moore had introduced still lingered in its atmosphere.

William looked up grimly at the distant stars. He straightened his shoulders as though to throw off an irksome load. He was a man, a young



man. Why should he accept dreariness, abnegation, for his portion, when a feast, a warm, bright feast, was already spread for him? While this pulsing desire throbbed through his veins, to do that seemed the part of a fool.

With all the might of his man's will, strongly, William followed the call.



## CHAPTER VIII

### A QUESTION OF EQUITY

MR. VAN BESTEN arrived at his store at precisely half-past eight, and gave his accustomed scrutiny to matters in general, before proceeding to his office. He had a deliberate way of going from department to department, asking the clerk in charge of each a dry, pertinent question or so, and keeping himself fully informed as to the pettiest details of his big business. His employes were inclined to grumble among themselves at this habit of his, which nevertheless held them properly subordinated. They respected Mr. Van Besten, but they felt no sentimental attachment to him as he very well knew.

The clerk at the notions counter, a slender, rather colorless young fellow, engaged at this early hour in regulating the stock in his charge, was keenly conscious of his employer's approach. His movements became exasperatingly awkward, his fingers seemed transformed all to thumbs. His unwary elbow sent a large paper box off the counter, from which dozens of spools of cotton



thread rolled in all directions. Mr. Van Besten paused at the notions counter and waited in an attitude of impassive disapproval until the flushed, embarrassed young fellow had gathered up the spools. Then he looked at him severely.

"You were not here yesterday afternoon, I believe?"

"No, sir." The boy's voice betrayed perturbation. His employer's look demanded explanation. "I was obliged to go out of town for a few hours."

"You were obliged to go? What do you mean by that?" Mr. Van Besten's voice was cuttingly incredulous. "Was there any obligation upon you to attend the football game?"

He forestalled the excuses ready to stammer forth. "I happen to know that you were there."

The younger man was silent.

"When you asked me yesterday morning if you could absent yourself from business for half a day, I told you no. I saw no reason why I should make you a present of the time for which I pay you. Nevertheless, you deliberately disregarded my decision and took your afternoon's amusement."

"I'd arranged to go. I didn't think a few hours like that would make such difference. I've never lost an hour before since I've been working for you, Mr. Van Besten."

"Why should you? Do you take that for a merit to yourself? I consider that your time



belongs to me, that you have no right to dispose of an hour of your working day without my permission."

The cold voice cut the youth's sensibilities. His half defiant, half pleading gaze wavered before Mr. Van Besten's unsparing directness. How could he set forth all the invincible, invisible pulls that had led him forth to pleasuring? He perceived no fellow feeling in his employer to which he could appeal. He took refuge in helpless silence, which had appearance of sulkiness.

"While you are in my employ you cannot disregard my orders with impunity," Mr. Van Besten said austerely. "I want the services of no one upon whom I cannot depend. I will dispense with your services after this week."

The young clerk's lips twitched slightly, but he steadied them. Resentment burned in his breast against the severity accorded him. He knew himself to have done wrong, but he detested his judge. "Very well, Mr. Van Besten," he said, not without manliness.

William passed on to his office looking very grim and austere. He felt that he had administered a much needed lesson to youthful in consequence, and held himself justified in his severity. Yet the short, unpleasant interview had brushed the bloom off the morning for him. He believed that he had acted wisely, but he had been obliged to push down kindlier promptings in order to live up to his own standard of business adminis-



tration. He turned to his correspondence and dismissed the incident.

Sally Van Besten visited the store that morning. She carried a small package. A suave salesman stepped forward to greet her. He was a newcomer in Kirton and he cherished an ambitious intention of becoming indispensable at Van Besten's. He had already seen this lady once or twice, but he did not know her name. "Good morning, madam." His suavity had the thickness of cream. "What can I do for you this morning?"

He listened attentively while she explained her errand and his perfunctory good-will gave way to perplexity. "Well, really, I'm afraid that is a little too much for me," he admitted. "Perhaps you'd better see Mr. Van Besten himself about it."

"Oh, no, I don't think it's necessary to disturb Mr. Van Besten," Sally said quickly. "I'd rather not."

The salesman left her no choice. "He will know just what to do," he said insistently. "This way, if you please, madam."

Sally felt constrained to follow or else appear singular, as he led the way to William's office, but she was annoyed.

The office door was open. The salesman hesitated deferentially on the threshold before he spoke. "Mr. Van Besten, there's a lady here to see you."



Mr. Van Besten rose and for an instant looked eagerly, expectantly at his wife.

"No, I didn't think it would be necessary to interrupt you," Sally interposed quickly.

"She says there's been a mistake made in some dress goods she bought here," the salesman explained.

"A mistake," Mr. Van Besten echoed. He was still regarding Sally, whose demeanor had a somewhat thorny effect of displeasure.

"Yes, sir. The lady will explain." The salesman hurried back to his duties.

"Won't you sit down?" asked Mr. Van Besten, ceremoniously.

"I won't take up much of your time," Sally said hurriedly, as she accepted a chair. She was bright-eyed, unsmiling; and she looked at him very directly with an air of serious business.

"You are not disturbing me in the least," he assured her politely. "Is there anything I can do for you?" Involuntarily they took a long critical look at each other, but each remained bafflingly impenetrable. She was not too pre-occupied to notice that he was looking thin and pale, older looking than she had ever seen him. With a pang she recognized that he lacked the genial air of a man at ease with life.

To relieve her sense of embarrassment, Sally hurried into her errand. She glanced at her package. "I bought a linen lawn dress here some time ago. Bought it and paid for it and had it sent home."



"Yes? And isn't it satisfactory?" asked the young merchant.

"Yes, it's satisfactory, but—you see, I had the stuff washed and ironed last week before I made it up. I thought it was better to do that because linen lawn's so apt to shrink, you know."

"Yes." William agreed as though he knew all about such matters.

"I never unfolded it until it came home from the washerwoman's, and then there seemed to be such a quantity that I measured, and I found that you'd sent me twenty-eight yards instead of the fourteen yards I bought."

"Very careless, certainly," said William. He began to look genuinely interested. At first he had seemed to be listening merely from courtesy. "Do you know which of my clerks sold the goods to you?"

Sally hesitated. "It's so long since I bought it. I might make a mistake. I'd rather not say."

"I'd like to have you remember if you can." William drew a bit of paper toward him and picked up a pencil. "When did you say you made this purchase?"

"I don't remember the exact date." She flushed guiltily, conscious of prevarication. It would have been so easy to have found out all about it by hunting up the item in her carefully kept account book. But she had intentionally refrained from doing so.

"Isn't there some way by which you can recall



it?" he persisted. "I should like to investigate this matter."

She disliked his expression of severe intention. "That's just what I don't want you to do. I don't want to get anybody into trouble. Why, I've been advised two or three times not to bring back the goods at all; just to let it go. People seem to think that it's too small a loss for Van Besten's to mind. They tell me that merchants hate to have such little mistakes revived to make trouble and necessitate altering their ledgers and things." She looked at him very earnestly, and it seemed to her that he had no business to remain so stern and immovable. Impatience against him rose within her. "Of course I didn't want to keep the stuff. I felt that I had to bring it back, but I should be very, very sorry if my doing so got the poor clerk into trouble."

"No poor clerk about it," William said decidedly. "I don't think you quite understand this matter." He warmed to the argument, forgetting all else. "You see, Mrs.—" William paused, suddenly recalled. Then he went on. "You see, there's a principle involved, an abstract principle of right and wrong."

"Yes, I suppose so, but then everybody makes a mistake once in awhile. I suppose you might possibly do a careless thing yourself upon occasion." She spoke rather aggressively, for she found William's judicial attitude irritating.

She felt that he regarded her feminine inconse-



quence with something like lenient contempt. "Listen," he said, leaning forward impressively. "I am sure you will admit that whichever one of my clerks sold you the goods was not giving his undivided attention to business as he should have been doing, or he never would have measured off a double quantity. I confess I see no reason for slurring over his gross carelessness. But that is not all. I have another man in my employ whose duty it is to verify every purchase with the slip he receives with it before it is shipped to the customer. Why didn't he discover this error? How did he come to send out twenty-eight yards of material with a check calling for fourteen? Isn't it clear that he never took the trouble to remeasure? Can I afford to pass over such things?"

"But perhaps such a mistake has never occurred before," Sally suggested diffidently.

"I sincerely hope it doesn't occur very often," William said grimly.

"Can you trace it back?" she asked.

"That is what I shall endeavor to do."

"Oh, I wish I hadn't tried to be honest!" she cried impetuously. "I almost wish I'd kept the goods."

"Goods that don't belong to you?" William smiled and looked more genial. "But I would have sent for it. It was certainly very kind of you to fetch it up." He glanced inquiringly at the package, but she did not hand it over. Her well



rounded, vigorous young figure opposed him erectly, and she looked decidedly aggressive. If William was so devoted to abstract justice, he should have it.

"I had it all shrunk you know," she reminded him. "I paid two dollars and a half to have that done; that is a dollar and a quarter for this piece I'm bringing back. I don't want your goods," she spoke decidedly, "but I don't see any reason why I should pay for shrinking it."

"No, but then I'd so much rather you hadn't shrunk it, you know." William spoke soberly, but there was rather a merry look in his eyes. He settled himself back in his chair as though he were, on the whole, taking pleasure in the interview. An agreeable perception came to her that she was certainly not boring him.

"Of course I never would have had it done if I had discovered the mistake in time," she defended herself.

"I could have sold the lawn to much better advantage if it hadn't been washed and all the dressing taken out of it," William went on in his deliberate way. "Now there's nothing for it but to mark down the price and put it on the bargain counter. How much did you say you paid? Forty cents a yard? I doubt if I can get more than thirty cents for it now. Moreover, I suppose there is rather less of it than there was before it was shrunk."

"But that isn't my fault," Sally said with spirit.



"It isn't mine either, is it?" he inquired. "We both have suffered from those we employ."

"But the initial mistake was on your side," she reminded. She had an uncertain impression that he was covertly laughing at her. Yet he spoke so impressively that she felt perplexedly he must be taking the matter seriously.

"What would you like me to do about this?" he asked.

"I prefer to leave that entirely to you," she told him primly.

William looked at her reflectively and she could not help wondering if his attention was as concentrated upon the linen lawn as it appeared to be. Then he smiled and revealed an undercurrent of amusement. She felt absurdly irritated at her own suspicion that perhaps he had been secretly laughing at her throughout the interview. She rose quickly. "It really isn't of the slightest consequence. I'm in rather a hurry." She laid the package on his desk.

William's slight thaw congealed again at her change of manner.

"Of course it is not proper that you should pay for the shrinking. You will allow me to refund the amount." A peculiar expression lurked about his lips as he drew a plump Russia leather wallet from his pocket and opened it. Sally recognized the wallet at once. She had given it to him herself as a Christmas present in the past time. It occurred to her that the



wallet had worn better than some other things. She stood silently observant while William folded a silver quarter neatly within a crisp dollar bill and held it out to her.

"Thank you," she said, accepting it in an airily impersonal way that disguised a strong reluctance. But this was justice—the justice for which he had argued. "I'm sorry to have taken up so much of your time."

William was looking at her as though he had something yet to say for which it was very difficult to find expression. His resolute bearing might easily have softened to pleading if he had received any encouragement from this rosy young woman whose hazel eyes were unusually and brightly evasive. He could not perceive the flutter at her heart which made it appear desperately necessary that she should get herself out of his office without delay. There was an instant when their hands seemed strongly inclined to stretch out and meet. They were held apart by the evil, invisible spirits that exult in maintaining discord.

"Good morning," said Sally and walked away briskly, without another glance.

William looked after her thoughtfully and then he went back and sat down before his desk, and for a long time gave not a thought to his business.



## CHAPTER IX

### WHY SALLY INTRUDED

“GOOD morning, everybody,” Sally said brightly, as she came into the dining-room. She had the breezy off-hand manner of one armed against possible remonstrances.

Her sister-in-law surveyed her with surprise. “Why, Sally, what made you put on your new suit this morning? How beautifully it fits,” she added, with quick feminine appreciation of Sally’s trim and stylish appearance.

“Anything I can do for you in Kirton?” Sally asked, taking her place at the table.

“Are you going to Kirton this morning?” Annie exclaimed. “Why, how can you? I thought you had such lots of work on hand just now.” She noticed that Sally did not look back in her usual straightforward way.

“So I have,” Sally answered. “It’ll have to wait, that’s all. I’m not going to sit and sew day in and day out for anybody. Flesh and blood won’t stand it.” She seemed to be replying less to Annie’s speech than to suppressed objections of her own against her own decision.



"What about Mrs. Holt's brilliantine?" Mrs. Haselton reminded.

"Mrs. Holt has two brilliantine dresses already," Sally said quickly. "The one I made her last summer, and the one I made her the summer before. Beside, she doesn't want that new brilliantine to wear. All she wants is to hang it up to season in her spare room closet. I certainly shan't stay home for that."

"I shouldn't think you'd wear that new suit just to go shopping in Kirton," Annie ventured to criticise. "You'll get the skirt all wrinkled sitting in that old mail wagon."

Sally paid no attention. She caught hold of little Joe, who had climbed down from his chair. "Let me take off your bib, honey. My, what a sticky kiss! Joey, what do you want Aunt Sally to bring you from Kirton?"

Sally started presently in apparent gaiety, with a jaunty wave of the hand to her family watching her off. But as the mail wagon went on its way, her face settled into thoughtfulness. Her spirit was depressed as she recalled the work piled up in her room waiting for her. The pull upon her was a strong one and she was resolute to yield to it, but still she was dissatisfied with herself for yielding. Somehow it had become necessary for her to go to Kirton. What was she going to do when she was there, how occupy the long hours before Perry would start homeward. She did not clearly know.



The mail wagon had left the quiet country road and was rumbling over the cobbled street. Sally saw a buggy coming along. It was the identical buggy in which once upon a time she had set forth with her husband for a new home. William Van Besten was driving. Beside him sat a pretty young woman apparently addressing him in merry expostulation to which he was according close attention. Sally would have liked to pretend that she did not see William, but pride would not allow the pretence. She looked at him directly, proudly, unsmilingly, prepared to bow. But William never observed her nor did his companion. Sally looked quickly past William at the young woman chatting with him with such effect of familiar, accustomed intercourse. Her attractiveness could not be denied, or that William Van Besten seemed fully aware of it. The two in the buggy looked smiling and lighthearted as though bound for pleasuring. On the whole, Sally felt glad to be tucked away so unobtrusively on the middle seat of the covered mail wagon. The Manorton neighbor who shared the seat gave her a sly, interested glance. Sally made herself noncommittal to the glance. She felt a bitter amusement at herself because she had come up to Kirton. To know that she was sure not to encounter William brought her a kind of relief. Yet his absence emptied Kirton of interest. To see him driving away had all the purpose out of her coming. She felt suddenly weary, suddenly



depressed. It was stupid of her to come. It would have been so much more sensible to have stayed at home and gone on with her work. William did look pale and worn and thin. Even in her brief glimpse of him she had realized that he looked no better, worse rather, than when she had been shocked by his appearance the day she saw him in his office. She hardened her heart against him. He was not feeling too badly to be enjoying life it would seem. She had not intended to go to Van Besten's store to-day, but there was no reason now why she should keep away.

"I'll get out at Van Besten's, please," she told Perry Herter firmly. She was conscious of playing a little part with herself as she climbed out of the wagon and went into the store. She stopped and puckered her brow as she studied her list with an absorbed air. All the time she knew that it was really ridiculous to pretend even to oneself to have come all the way up to Kirton for these remotely needed buttons and tapes. Sally felt a little stinging bruise in her self-esteem as she walked away from Van Besten's.

Mrs. Van Besten went next to a drug store. Not the one usually patronized by the Haselton family. Mrs. Haselton had requested her to buy some benzine for spot cleaning in little Joe's behalf. Sally bought from the drug store two bottles precisely wrapped in white paper and tied with pink cord. Fifteen minutes later she



was getting off the trolley at the corner near William Van Besten's house. Her heart was beating violently as she pushed open William's gate and entered his yard. William's mother used to have gay delightful flower beds, but William had no flowers. The big bare brick house had a dismal, inhospitable appearance, with all the green shutters closed across the front. A stray dog had left muddy tracks all over the front veranda.

Trying to appear more confident than she felt, always acutely conscious of some possible spectator, Mrs. Van Besten went boldly up to the front door and rang the bell. To her own disgust she was trembling with nervousness. The ringing of the bell was merely an idle form, a sacrifice of appearance and the possibility of a charwoman. She did not expect it to be answered. She knew very well that the house was empty, since William was off driving with a pretty woman. Still she waited a reasonable time before she hesitatingly laid hold of the knob. The door was locked. Sally stood there deliberating for several minutes. Then she walked up and down the veranda, and the sound of her footfall was loud in her ears. Presently she sat down close against the front door one of the bottles she had brought from the drug shop. William would see it when he came up the path. But he might fail to do so. Men are sometimes so unobservant, and she knew that William rarely used his front door.



Sally went back and took the package again. She went softly around the house, almost on tiptoe, as one who had no right to be there, and knocked gently on the side door. One of the yellow cats miaued in response, but there was no other sound from within. Sally propped up the bottle against the side door, sure that William could not help finding it there. She meant to hurry away now that her errand was accomplished, but she did not do so. The place held her as with a spell. The plans she had once formed for its improvement came back to her mind with a sickening flavor of futility. "I wonder if he's changed things at all. I remember just exactly how it looked that day he took me over it. I wonder——"

She looked around her carefully. It was impossible that she should be seen from the street, and a close board fence screened her from observation at the back and side. With her face flushing guiltily, and a guilty, troubled look in her hazel eyes, Sally stood on tiptoe and ran her hand gropingly along the top of the window. Her fingers closed over the key lying there. So William still kept the key where he always used to keep it. Sally looked undecidedly at the smooth, use-polished thing lying in her hand. Then she put it in the keyhole and turned it, and opened the door, and stood on her husband's threshold. How still the house seemed, and how dreadfully musty. "I don't believe he's



aired it out for a month," she said under her breath. She had no business to do it. She knew that perfectly as she went stealthily along the hall. "This is perfectly horrible of me!" she murmured under her breath. The only sound in the house except the sound she made was the droning tick of the tall hall clock. To her attentive ears it seemed remonstrant, reproachful, but she would not heed. "What a queer looking place," she said, under her breath. When William had shown her through his house three years ago, it had been furnished, not over abundantly, in the prim commonplace way characteristic of half a century earlier. Now the rooms were crowded uncomfortably full of all kinds of ancient furniture. The wide hall was like a lumber room. The front door had not been opened for weeks. It was barricaded with an array of fireplace utensils—andirons with branches of brass which had once been burnished bright by careful housewives, but now were lustreless, shovels and tongs and bellows and other obsolete implements of which Sally could not even guess the use. Almost holding her breath, Sally stole through the long double parlor, weaving her way among massive mahogany sideboards and sofas and little square workstands, and chairs with tall spindle backs or graceful harp backs inlaid with satinwood. A moving shade passed across the blurred old surface of a Dutch mirror propped up on the sofa, and the intruder started in great fright lest after all



she was not alone. But the moving shadow had been only her own reflection. Again and again she encountered herself in the ancient mirrors propped against the walls. The mellowed gold of their broad frames gleamed out even in the twilighty rooms. The round ghostly faces of three tall silent clocks stared down at her from as many corners. The tall, narrow mantelpieces were crowded with candlesticks and snuffers and gay old china ornaments. Sally left the parlors and crossed the hall to the disused sitting-room. At once she remembered that William had bought andirons for the fireplace here, because she had expressed a wish for them. They were really here. He had given them to her the evening before their wedding. She knelt down on the floor to examine her andirons. They were certainly very handsome, exactly to her taste. She laid a hand caressingly on the brass dog's head surmounting each. She remembered so well how William had told her about the andirons as they sat together in the porch. She closed her eyes, remembering, and the fragment air of the June evening seemed to drift again across her senses. She felt disposed to sit there for a long time musing and remembering; but although there was no real danger of interruption, she constantly feared one. So with a long sigh, she roused herself and rose from her crouching position on the carpet. She stood there hesitating, convinced that she ought to go away, yet finding singular interest



in being where she was, and in satisfying her curiosity about the setting of William's life. She went softly back through the long wide hall, and through the narrower hall at the rear, and entered the kitchen.

The yellow cats, dozing in a patch of sunlight under a window, opened their wise topaz eyes, and blinked at her in sleepy surprise. The visitor bent over to stroke their arching, furry backs, and they purred in such audible pleasure that she instinctively bade them, "Hush! Hush!" She felt disposed to bid them not to tell tales.

In a corner beyond the table, a battered broom was leaning against the kitchen wall. Involuntarily Sally caught it up as she passed, and turned it upside down. She knew, even if William Van Besten did not, that it was ruinous to a broom to be left standing on its brush end.

The dishcloth, damp and stiff with use, hung over the kitchen sink. Sally surveyed it disapprovingly. "That dishcloth is simply abominable," she told the cats. It was frayed and ragged and musty, decidedly musty. Sally sniffed it with disgust. "Of course it would never occur to him to scald it out occasionally."

A swing door led from the kitchen to a wood-house beyond. Sally scrutinized critically William's device for holding the swing door closed. He had improvised a loop from a piece of worn blue suspender, by pinning together the ends. The loop was attached to the doorknob and then



stretched to a nail which he had driven in the door frame. The scrim curtain on the half glass door leading from the yard into the kitchen was tied neatly back with one of William's shoe-strings. Sally laughed softly, half tenderly, at the clumsy masculine makeshifts. But the sight of one of old Mrs. Van Besten's best pink and white china vegetable dishes half full of milk set down on the brick hearth for the cats, brought a frown to young Mrs. Van Besten's smooth white brow. How could even a man be so regardless of his valuable old family china? Sally went from the kitchen across the butler's pantry to the dining-room. She did not pause in the pantry longer than to give one swift glance up at the well-stocked shelves behind the glass doors, doors which she thought would be the better for washing. With a stifled exclamation, Sally grasped the changed appearance of the dining-room. She remembered exactly how it had looked when William brought her here three years ago and took her all over the house, and they had been happy and merry together, and just a little tender. She remembered how she had twitted William upon his bad taste in dining-room furniture, and had derided the commonplace oak table and chairs, and told him the chairs were horrors, and William had appeared quite charmed to have her rail at him. The ugly oak set had disappeared. In its stead was rich and beautiful mahogany. The table was as smooth and ruddy as a horse-



chestnut freshly bursting from its prickly burr. It suggested some vanished Colonial mansion, some stately old-time couple with a troop of sons and daughters, guests and dependants gathered about them at table. So did the chairs, the fine Heppelwhite chairs with their harp backs, their high seats widening out from back to front. So did the massive buffet with its little brass fence around the top and its many cupboards and deep drawers.

A great grease spot stared at her from the rug on the dining-room floor. A most horrid grease spot, likely to spread. With the remedy at hand, it really seemed wrong to leave that spot. Sally stole back to the kitchen and sought out the most tattered of William's nondescript array of towels; then returning to the dining-room, she opened Mrs. Haselton's benzine, knelt down, and scrubbed vigorously at the spot. "There, I guess I have it all out," she said finally, with a sigh of relief. "He'll probably never know it's gone, but I shall feel much better even if it isn't any business of mine."

She stood looking about at the handsome furniture. Somehow, she divined that these pieces in the dining-room were the beginning of William's collection. He had known little and cared less about such things in the old days. Whether he knew it or not, he never would have cared about them but for her. She felt gratifying conviction of that fact. For the moment William



was forgiven his pretty companion of the morning. Sally had forgotten all about her in thinking of happy dead days. Then she roused herself. What was the sense of becoming sentimental. Perhaps she and William had never cared very much for each other, as much as they had thought they did. They could certainly get along very well without each other. She told herself proudly that all she wanted now was to treat William fairly and squarely, and not to stand in the way of any happiness he sought.

Suddenly a great shame fell upon her. What business had she to be playing the part of a spy upon him? How could she ever justify to herself her intrusion into William's house unknown to him? Her blood coursed hot in self-contempt. How could she ever have done it? She felt that she could not get away quickly enough from William's premises. She would not permit herself even one more glance at anything of his, as she fled.

As she walked back to Kirton, trying to control her propensity to hurry, she met Judge Burrall. He stopped to shake hands. "My dear young lady, I'm glad I haven't missed you. Have you been to my house? Won't you come back with me?" He felt quite sure that she had been seeking him.

"No, I—I wasn't expecting to bother you this morning." Sally seemed oddly disconcerted. The Judge was unable to see any reason for her



slight confusion. He regarded her with some curiosity. "You've done nothing more, I suppose, since our interview? Taken no further action?"

"No. Oh, no. You seemed so sure I'd better wait. Do you think the time has come to do something?" she asked anxiously. She was flushed and flurried.

"I'd wait a little longer," he advised decidedly.



## CHAPTER X

### A COUNTRY VENDUE

AS William Van Besten's accustomed finger reached to the top of the window for the door-key, his feet knocked over something on the mat. He stooped over to investigate and picked up the bottle that Sally had left and carried it into the house. Setting it down, he went about housekeeping cares. He was methodically measuring out coffee for to-morrow's breakfast when one of the cats, hungering for a caress, leaped on the table. She hit his hand precisely as it lifted a heaping tablespoonful of fragrant brown grounds. They were dashed to the floor and crunched under his feet. Orderly William sought his broom to sweep up. It was a vague surprise to him to find the broom standing upside down. He had never known himself to leave it in that position, but he gave the matter no consideration.

He stopped to sniff in the dining-room. "I can't think where this smell of benzine comes from." But he never noticed that the unsightly grease spot had disappeared from the carpet.



Presently, when there was nothing else to do, he remembered the package he had picked up at his door, and sat down to examine it. He unfolded the wrappings in a leisurely way and extricated the bottle. "Houston's Specific," he read from the label. "An invaluable remedy for persons recovering from severe illness or otherwise debilitated. Agreeable, fortifying, unexcelled. Dose: One teaspoonful three times a day." William held the bottle up to the light to regard the clear amber contents. He removed the cork and sniffed the fluid tentatively. "Rather pungent and agreeable. Miserable quack compound!" he addressed the bottle sternly. "Pretty poor business I should say to distribute it in such quantities. A sample one-fourth the size would answer the purpose." He rose with the intention of emptying the medicine into the kitchen sink, then decided to set it up on the sideboard for the present.

The front doorbell rang. William hastily lighted a candle, which he carried in his hand, as he went through the long hall. "Who is there?" he called.

"It is I, Mr. Van Besten, Judge Burrall."

William made an apologetic sound. "I'm afraid I have to ask you to step around to the side door, Judge. This one is too obstructed to open. If you don't mind stepping around to the side door?"

"Not in the least. Certainly." The Judge



answered cheerfully and William heard him thumping down the steps with his cane. William stepped quickly to the side door and threw it open and stood ready to welcome his guest. "Pleased to see you, Judge. Walk in. A man gets into bad habits living alone. Now if you'll excuse me for one moment I'll light the sitting-room." He spoke cordially.

"Pray don't trouble yourself," the Judge said quickly. "Why not sit here where you usually sit? This is all right."

But Mr. Van Besten persisted in lighting the sitting-room. When he was invited to walk into it, the Judge glanced with some curiosity toward the front door. An old Dutch Kaas, a cumbrous affair with heavy fluted pillars and a vast drawer below its ample cupboard, stood before the door. William noticed the glance and called his guest's attention to the Kaas. "This is a recent acquisition of mine. I found it up in Albany. Of course that's no place for it, in front of my door. I simply had it put there until I can decide what to do with it."

"It is a delightful old piece," the Judge said cordially. "I've heard you were a collector, Mr. Van Besten. I used to know something of such matters myself. It's a fascinating study."

William responded at once to the Judge's interested tone. "Perhaps you'll let me show you what I have. I'd like your opinion on some of these things. You see, I knew nothing about



antiques when I began. I know a little more now."

For an hour or more the young man and the old man wandered happily from room to room. The old mansion took on an unaccustomed effect of illumination as William lighted the chandeliers that had not been lighted for years. William hesitated on the foot of the stairs. "There are some rather good pieces upstairs if you care to go up?"

"Yes, indeed. Let's see them by all means." The Judge followed William with alacrity up the broad shallow stairs. With subdued elation, William led from one big square bedchamber to another and displayed his treasures in four-posters, in chests and dressers. Nothing could have thawed him into sociability more quickly than interest displayed in his collection. The Judge's manner, open, easy, pleasant, never betrayed that he was studying his host with keener interest than he bestowed upon the collection. The charm of the showing to William was the fact that the Judge admired with knowledge and discrimination. Indeed, to establish his connoisseurship he criticised adversely here and there.

"That's no Sheraton," he pronounced decidedly, shaking his head contemptuously at the stand which William called him to admire. "That's much more recent. Yes, I can prove it to you."

The argument lasted all the way downstairs. They took it up again when William had heed-



fully turned out the lights in the long parlor and they were comfortably seated in the sitting-room.

To this understanding listener William showed the knowledge he possessed. He told humorous stories, dryly, effectively, of how he had come by some of his possessions. The two quite warmed toward each other.

The Judge was astonished at the glow and animation of the young man who usually appeared so cold and austere. From the standpoint of a man who remembers what the interests of life may be he felt that there was something whimsically humorous and pitiful both in such an absorption.

"Have you any idea what you'll do eventually with your collection?" he asked. "This house won't hold a great deal more."

"No." A little sadness fell upon William at the reminder. "You see, I began with the idea merely of furnishing this house in keeping with its age and style. Some of these days I intend to have the rooms all overhauled and then fit up each as completely as possible. Whatever is left over I'll have to dispose of in some way or other, I suppose."

He felt a little ill at ease under the Judge's kind, comprehending gaze. "It's a fine hobby. I think myself that it's good for a man to have a hobby. Only—" the Judge hesitated. He was beginning to like this young man very much, but after all he knew him very slightly. "Of course, it



doesn't take the place of other things. After all, a man is scarcely justified in letting his affection centre on tables and chairs. We all need, we all ought to have, human companionship."

The words sounded slightly admonitory. Yet they were spoken so genially that William took no offence. The Judge's instinct guided him away from further intrusion. Nor had he forgotten the main object of his call.

"By the way, I should think you might find something interesting at the vendue at the old Waring place."

"What's that? I don't know about that," William said with immediate interest.

The Judge puffed away for a moment, then flicked off the cigar ash into the tray William had provided. "Didn't you ever drive by the old Waring place?" he asked. "A fine old house with an evergreen hedge in front, five or six miles the other side of Manorton?"

"The house with the big square porch in front? Yes, I remember it," William said.

The Judge's expression grew reminiscent. "I used to visit there at one time. I was sweet on one of the girls," he confessed genially.

"Well, the family are all gone now. I saw the death of Miss Cornelia only a few weeks ago. Cornelia and Mary, they were the last. They never married. They lived and died in the old place." The Judge's voice was warm with recollection. It communicated to William Van



Besten a subtle inkling of strong, sweet past emotions. He did not care to break the pause before the Judge went on in a different tone:

"That old house is simply stuffed with antique treasures. There was an old buffet that I've never seen equalled, and some pieces of Chippendale."

A business-like alertness seized Mr. Van Besten. "When is the vendue to be?"

"Let me see—the fifteenth. That's to-morrow, isn't it? Begins at two, I believe. Think you'll drive down?"

"Yes, I think I will. Much obliged to you for telling me about it."

The Judge laid down his cigar stub. "That was a very fine cigar, Mr. Van Besten. Drop in and sample my brand when you've nothing better to do."

"I'll be pleased to do so, Judge," with a pleasant liking for this companionable old man. William lighted him down the sidesteps.

The Judge soliloquized all the way home. "An excellent fellow, but if he isn't circumvented he'll develop into a first-class crank."

The yard which the old Waring sisters had taken pride in keeping trim, was littered with twigs and last year's sodden leaves. There had been no one to take pride in it this Spring.

Sally Van Besten was struck by the contrast. "How differently the place looks already," she said to her brother Joe. "How unhappy the poor old ladies would be to see it now."



"Let's hope they can't," Joe said stoically. He cramped the wagon so that his sister could climb out. He had other business to which to attend and meant to return for her.

"Try to get back as soon as you can, won't you, Joe?" she requested.

"Yes, I will, but it's going to take me some time to go 'way over there and back. See here, Sally, don't get impatient if you have to wait a little," Joe answered, and drove away.

Sally found the yard, the house, the barn, lively with people who had arrived in time for a preliminary survey of what was to be sold. The Waring sisters had lived secluded lives, holding themselves somewhat above the people about them. They had cherished family pride all the more when the family fortunes failed. Then they withdrew more and more from their neighbors into the seclusion of the stately home where all the long monotonous stretch of their years had been passed. They had been as shadows in the community. The setting of their carefully reticent lives now revealed was interesting to their neighbors. In the spacious low ceiled rooms, Sally found weather-beaten farmers chewing long stems of grass in a reflective manner, which they might have learned from their cows. Their sharp-eyed, practical wives were audibly disparaging whatever they wished to possess.

She noticed the heirs, a grandnephew and grandniece, pass through the rooms several times,



scrutinizing the assembling crowd, appraising them as probable buyers. The middle-aged faces of the heirs were not attractive. They looked anxious to conclude this settling up of the estate, to realize as much as possible, and to be off whence they came. They had no feeling for the old home.

An increasing pity for the dead old sisters softened Sally's heart as she wandered about the rooms from which semblance of homelikeness had disappeared. The furniture, the array of ancient crockery set out upon the tables, the glazed bunches of wax flowers, the whatnots filled with quaint odds and ends, all had a forlorn aspect thus huddled together haphazard that they might be appraised by mercenary eyes and fingers. All the sentiment, the quality that had made them precious to their owners, seemed to have been suddenly stripped from them.

Sally's heart gave a jump. She had seen William Van Besten coming into the room. She would have to meet him. Ordinarily, an encounter with William had ceased to be an ordeal, now that she and he had demonstrated that they were able to live their lives serenely, with no reference to each other. But to-day, at sight of him, guilty recollection of her secret visit to his house oppressed her.

William quickly caught sight of Sally. Sally recollected herself and gave him a constrained bow. William gravely acknowledged it. Pres-



ently he joined her as she stood turning over a trayful of trifles. "This must have been a fine old house in its day," he observed.

"Yes, indeed." He did not understand why she scrutinized him in such a questioning way. William could not possibly know that Sally was wishing that she knew whether he had taken his tonic. It seemed to her that he was less thin and pale than when they had discussed the linen lawn in his office. "I believe he has tried it and it's done him good," she thought, and smiled with sudden brightness which he found very pleasant.

"They're getting ready to begin the sale. Don't you think we'd better sit down?" he suggested.

"Perhaps we had," she agreed.

They went slowly forward to the tiers of camp stools and with a growing sense of sociability settled themselves advantageously. The auctioneer took his place at the desk at the end of the room and an expectant smile ran wavelike over the faces of his audience. The auctioneer was well known as a humorous character likely to furnish a cheering hour. Sally paid closest attention to the business in hand. As he sat beside her, close enough to catch suggestion of her favorite perfume, William cast long, thoughtful glances at her profile, at the coil of bright brown hair under her blue hat. The time before their wedding was so far away that he did not recall



it now. He felt almost as though he were just getting acquainted with a charming stranger, a stranger rather difficult to know.

It was now the turn of the rush-bottomed chairs, the chairs which Mrs. Joe Haselton particularly desired to own. To secure them if possible, Sally had come at her sister-in-law's request. She straightened in her seat as she saw one of the half dozen brought forward. The auctioneer lifted it so that all could see it, and then sat it back on the floor. "How much am I offered for six rush-bottomed hand-painted chairs? Good as they were the day they were made."

"Quarter apiece," came a voice from the rear.

"It's an insult to them," said the auctioneer.

"Fifty cents," called Sally.

William glanced at her in surprise. He had particularly admired the rush-bottomed chairs. Nor did he think that Sally really wanted them. Why should she want chairs?

"Seventy-five," he said.

"A dollar," Sally called promptly.

William nodded a quarter advance. The two had the bidding to themselves. As always, William was persistent.

"Dollar and a half." As she said it, Sally could not help giving William a reproachful glance. Annie wanted the chairs and she did not want to pay a great deal for them.

A mischievous sparkle was in William's eyes as he leaned toward Sally confidentially. "Do



you really want them so very much?" he whispered.

"Annie does. I came on purpose to get them for her." Sally's voice was reproachful, so were her eyes.

"One and a half—one and a half—one and a half——"

"You must forgive me. You see, I didn't understand. I thought you were bidding half for fun." His eyes looked back in merry propitiation.

"Going, going, going, *thud*—gone." The chairs had been knocked down to Sally at a dollar and a half. She gave William a mollified look. "It was very kind of you to let me have them. I hope you didn't want them very much."

William laughed out boyishly. "I can exist without them, thank you. I'm pleased that Annie should have them. You can tell her that they are really good in their way and not so very easy to find nowadays."

"Annie isn't going to value them as antiques, but because they're pretty and sensible," Sally said.

The two felt themselves getting very pleasantly companionable.

The auctioneer now announced an intermission of fifteen minutes, when the sale would be resumed in the dining-room. "Let's walk about a bit," William said briskly. He showed no intention of leaving her. "Joe ought to be back by this time," she said uneasily. "Now that I have Annie's chairs, I really ought to go home."



"Let me take you home. I'll take you directly if you say so." He spoke eagerly.

Sally shrank a little from the invitation. "Oh, thank you very much, but I'd better wait for Joe. He's sure to be here soon now."

William did not urge his invitation. Somehow his silence made her feel that she had been rudely blunt and positive in her declining.

"There's Judge Burrall!" Sally exclaimed.

The Judge came up to them beaming satisfaction. "Good afternoon, Mrs. Van Besten. Good afternoon, Van Besten. Didn't expect to see me here, eh?"

"Hardly, as you didn't mention any intention of coming," William answered.

"The fact is, I hadn't the slightest idea of coming," the Judge admitted. "But the more I thought of it, the more I wanted to visit the old house once more before it passed into strange hands." To himself alone the Judge admitted the mingled motives which had brought him. He had so wanted to know whether William and his wife really met.

A call bell announced that the sale would be resumed. "I do wish Joe would come," Sally thought impatiently, as again William seated himself beside her. He did no bidding. She could not help feeling that he was staying on her account. Well, he needn't. She watched proceedings intently, but she was not always conscious of the object displayed. She was annoyed with



herself for being so insensely preoccupied with the long, quiet figure beside her, so aware each time she felt his steady gaze. She felt it often.

The auctioneer laid down his hammer and announced that the sale would be resumed on the following afternoon. The people hurried away. It was certainly very provoking of Joe not to come, to leave her to indefinite waiting in this dreary, dismantled house. She saw the heirs eyeing her and William as though wondering why they lingered, wishing evidently to be free of their presence. Sally pulled out her watch unostentatiously, not meaning William to see her do it, but perceiving that he did. An impatient little frown puckered her brow. William's eyes were upon her, forcing her to look at him. He smiled quizzically, with thorough understanding of her mood.

"Don't you think you'd better let me take you home? I go right past your door, you know. We can leave word for Joe that you've gone."

Sally smiled back at him frankly. "Very well." She accompanied him docilely.

Judge Burrall, extricating his own vehicle from the line tied to the fence opposite the Waring place, saw Mrs. Van Besten step into her husband's buggy. The Judge dropped his hitching strap and rubbed his hands together with delight.

Mr. and Mrs. William Van Besten drove sedately along the country road. If the recollection of the other disastrous drive of theirs, almost



four years in the past now, came to them, it did not haunt them as might have been expected. The present was too different, too interesting. They might have been two agreeable strangers meeting for the first time, attracted, yet cautious, aware that they knew very little concerning each other. An extreme courtesy held them aloof. Her bright, unflinching gaze baffled, seemed to defy him.

"That was a very pretty little table you bought," Sally said, in a politely conversational way.

"Yes, I was glad to get hold of that bit of Heppelwhite. It matches my dining-room set very well." William looked at her. "You've never seen it. You'd hardly recognize the room now."

Sally turned her head quickly and looked at the blue distant mountains. She felt steeped in shame to remember how she had invaded William's home, how she had prowled through his rooms and taken liberties with his possessions. Oh, if ever he were to find out what she had done! If anyone had seen her going in, coming out. She cringed with mortification at the thought. William was continuing:

"That oak set you disliked so much I got rid of long ago. The room's all furnished in mahogany now. Fine old Heppelwhite."

Sally felt the allusion which William had had no intention of making. He felt it himself as a mistake. There was a moment's awkward silence



which Sally bravely broke. "I'm sure they must be a great improvement." They were very heedful after that not to touch upon those sore things that lay behind them. They talked of the present, of Joe and Annie and little Joe, of William's collection.

When William drew up his horse at the Haselton gate Sally had the depressing sense that her spirit had been off on a brief holiday and must now return to humdrum every day. "Won't you come in and see Annie?" she invited formally. She wanted him to come. She wanted to show herself most impersonally kind and courteous, but because she was embarrassed, her voice sounded cold and constrained. William felt it so and his first impulse was to respond to its suggestion by declining and going his way. But something stronger than bruised self-love made him act otherwise.

"Thank you. I should like to pay my respects to Annie. I'll step in for a few minutes."

The two went soberly up the path side by side. Then a moment's bitterness possessed William, remembering when he had been there last.

Annie Haselton, watching for her family to return, could hardly believe her eyes. Then her wifely anxiety took fire and she hurried to the door. "Why, where's Joe? Has anything happened to Joe?"

Sally explained quickly.

"William, you must excuse me. I'm real glad



to see you." Annie held out her hand so cordially, her voice was so warm with feeling, that William's heart responded.

"Thank you, Annie," he said heartily.

"If you'll excuse me for a moment, I'll just get off my things." Sally felt impelled to escape from the room. She needed to school herself in a composed demeanor which could endure even Annie's questioning eyes, questioning how much William's presence might mean. She stood in her own room a little breathless at the situation. Some new element stirring her to unrest, incisive, interesting, seemed to have come suddenly into the monotony of her humdrum dressmaking.

She flung down her hat and coat upon the bed and crossed the room quickly to her dresser. Sally frowned at her own sparkling face in the mirror. Then she hurriedly rearranged her hair. Still frowning disapproval of herself, she pulled open her upper drawer and caught a soft blue necktie, with which she replaced the sober black one she was wearing. Then she went downstairs.

In a little while, William rose to go. "Come and see us again, William," Annie said cordially.

Involuntarily, before he answered, William turned and looked at Sally. She did not repeat the invitation, but her smile was hospitable. "Thank you, Annie, I certainly will," William said.

The door closed behind him.



“What does this mean?” Annie demanded, turning upon Sally with pretended severity.

“Now, Annie, don’t.” Sally took her mystified sister-in-law by the shoulder and shook her lightly, then kissed her heartily. She laid her burning cheek against Annie’s cool one. “It just happened so. It doesn’t mean anything at all and don’t you go to imagining it does.” She spoke with bright defiance, but there was no irritation in it. A subtle elation possessed her which she tried to hide.

Later, when Joe had come home and the family had gone to their rooms, she leaned on her window sill for a long time enjoying the fragrant night. She felt a new cheer, a fine serenity, and she thought this was because she and William had now demonstrated that it was possible for them to meet on a simple footing of friendliness.

“I wonder if he will come again,” thought Sally.



## CHAPTER XI

### THE FATE OF A CHURCH PALL

THE church bell was tolling for a funeral. Everyday occupations in Manorton had for the moment been largely set aside. As Mrs. Van Besten and Mrs. Haselton, the latter leading little Joe, came out of their gate, they heard other doors and gates opening and shutting, and saw many of their neighbors proceeding as they did themselves toward the church. People bowed soberly to each other and walked sedately. "Doesn't it seem exactly like Sunday?" Sally commented. Little Joe sighed as he tugged at his mother's hand. He looked very sweet, very demure, in his stiffly starched sailor suit, but he felt oppressed by this elaborate toilet at this unusual hour.

Shortly after the bell ceased tolling, William Van Besten drove along and stopped at the Haselton's. He rang the front door bell. There was no answer. A misgiving seized him as he rang again. The house certainly had an unusually shut-up look. He tried the door. Locked.



A keen disappointment was upon him. He by no means relished the thought that his long drive had been for nothing. He stood deliberating for some time before he walked slowly back to his horse. A small boy watched him with casual interest. "Do you know where the family are?" William asked.

The boy nodded. "Gone to the funeral. Mr. Haselton hasn't. He's at the mill. My mother's gone to the funeral too."

Mr. Van Besten felt that the situation was slightly ameliorated. A funeral can't take very long. He decided to wait. He left his horse under the hotel shed and wandered off aimlessly, looking frequently at his watch.

Mr. Silas Thompson was to be buried that afternoon. In Manorton the living consider it obligatory to pay final respect to the dead by attending the funeral service. Silas Thompson was an old man and he had been very slow about dying. Nobody bore him ill will, but nobody was especially sorry now that he was gone. His son's wife had been summoned from her distant home at the beginning of his illness. She had taken conscientious care of him for many weeks, but she often told the neighbors plaintively that she did not see how her family could possibly get along without her much longer. She had no idea, she said, that it was going to be so long.

Everybody in Manorton knew Silas Thompson, but perhaps nobody really liked or disliked him.



He had been a man of many vexations, great and small, which he had kept as much as possible to himself, asking no one for sympathy, going silently about the Manorton ways, as impersonal as his own long, angular shadow. Even the woman who cared for his house and cooked his meals was glad now to be released. She said frankly that she had found it lonesome living at Mr. Thompson's, and that her married daughter needed her to help with the children.

Dr. Lanson had given notice of the funeral on Sunday. Because Silas Thompson had lived among these men and women so long, they felt now that they must pay him the final tribute. A succession of carriages was passing through the wide gateway up to the gravelled drive through the churchyard. The village people, mostly on foot, passed through the small gate that barred the straight path from the street to the church porch. People stared a little or bowed with reserve when Mr. Harlan Morgan, tall and slouching, and Mr. Allen Mackenzie, trimmer, always aristocratic in bearing, in his well-worn, immaculate black suit, came up the path together. The two seldom entered the church. In fact, it was rather embarrassing to them to do so to-day. But in a distant, not forgotten time, they and Silas Thompson had belonged to the same set of gay young village people. Silas had married and allied himself to all that spelt respectability in Manorton. He and the black sheep had



drifted very far apart; but now that he lay dead they recalled the merry Si Thompson who once had been, and for his sake came to the funeral. Sally Van Besten gave them a bright smile and a cordial bow. It had become a pleasant knowledge between them and her that they understood and liked each other. She recognized instinctively that the occasion must be an ordeal to them, and that some kindly sentiment for the dead man brought them. Sally was a natural partisan. She enjoyed showing in public that in spite of the general adverse opinion, she was glad to stand on friendly terms with the two disregarded old men. The making of Millie Thompson's pink party gown had served to strengthen Sally's self-conviction of former prejudice. Mrs. Allan noticed Sally's smile. "Will you look at that!" she whispered disapprovingly to her daughter. "Sally Van Besten's so singular and unfeeling. You'd think she would try to look sober at a funeral, just to be seemly. Look at her. She couldn't look more pleased if it was the strawberry and ice cream festival."

Millie Thompson, too, smiled at the black sheep. She subdued her buoyancy of step as she came into the churchyard. "You mustn't hurry so, Morris," she admonished. "It doesn't look respectful."

Morris obediently reduced his springing gait, but at the same time he gave her a look that made her demure eyes dance with joy, because even if old Cousin Silas was dead, she and Morris were



young and happy. She felt tenderly compassionate for the old man who could never know any more of the abounding delicious thrills of living. How much of them had he ever known, she wondered.

Millie had come because the dead man was her father's cousin. There were plenty of people in Manorton who thought that he might have helped the poverty-stricken Thompson children more than he ever had done. When their father had disappeared he had done something, not much. Millie had struggled to feel grateful for the churlish aid, but she had not succeeded. She knew, instinctively, child as she was, that it had been accorded, not from any special kindness, any kinsmanly feeling for her and her little brothers, but to save Silas Thompson's family pride. She felt that he had grudged the benefaction and had avoided Cousin Silas, who was content to have her do so. But now that the solitary old man was dead, Millie reproached herself because she had never tried to make friends.

The people filed into the pews and sat decorously watching each other. Dr. and Mrs. Lanson arrived. Dr. Lanson went quickly up the aisle, a consciously dignified man, rather fine looking, always well dressed, always clerical, with a fine sense of his position and a ready professional urbanity. Mrs. Lanson, slender and worn, rather colorless in effect, neat but decidedly shabby in attire, hurried into her pew in her nervous little



way. Mrs. Lanson had worn the same black gown to church season after season. She had worn the same black bonnet which, with its modest rosette of blue satin ribbon, was an inoffensive anachronism. Mrs. Lanson's pretty brown hair was combed back tightly, with painful austerity, from her slightly sunken temples. She had the pale, worn aspect of the sweet-natured, nervously oppressed woman. The amenities of dress would have done much for her. She might have been so easily still a pretty woman, a pleasure to the eyes of the world, instead of strictly and unquestionably the creature of utility to which her unselfishness had reduced her. With the prestige of her husband to maintain, her four children, and very small means, Mrs. Lanson was a very busy woman. It had been particularly inconvenient to leave home this afternoon, but it had never occurred to her not to come.

She glanced at her watch. Still a few minutes before service would begin. With the nervous flutter of one whose minutes are overcrowded, she rose and tiptoed over to the Haselton pew. She smiled in a motherly fashion at staring little Joe, who, having clambered up on the seat, was pressing eager, tickling questions into his mother's ear.

"Be quiet, Joe. You must keep still," his mother commanded severely, then kissed him because he was so dear and sweet that she could not help it.



"I hope you're both coming to the sewing society at half-past four," Mrs. Lanson whispered remindingly. "It meets at the rectory to-day, you know."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Lanson, but I won't be able to come. I have to take the baby home, you see," Mrs. Haselton answered.

"But you'll come, Sally?"

"I don't see how I can to-day," Sally said, apologetically, with never a divination of William waiting impatiently for the funeral to be over.

"Oh, yes, please do, Sally," Mrs. Lanson urged. "I know how busy you are, but if you possibly can, I specially want you to be there to-day. You're always so practical and efficient. We need your judgment, you see. There is quite an important matter for us to decide."

Sally nodded good-naturedly. "Very well, Mrs. Lanson, I'll come."

The last solemn toll of the bell ceased as Mrs. Lanson tiptoed hurriedly back to her pew. She paused for an instant to bend across Morris Stetson and whisper remindingly, "You'll come to the sewing society afterwards, my dear?"

Millie Thompson blushed a little as she bent forward to answer. "I can't, Mrs. Lanson," she said bluntly. "I've promised to go walking with Morris."

Mrs. Lanson shook her head in mild reproach, but with a very kindly understanding in her pleasant eyes.



The congregation sat up expectantly. To many there the occasion was not without pleasurable excitement. Death brought a touch of drama into their uneventful lives. It stirred them with a sense of vague, illimitable mysteries with which they were usually too busy to concern themselves.

The handsome ebonized casket which contained Silas Thompson's worn-out body, had already been carried into the church, up to the head of the central aisle, and placed under the pulpit. The presence of Death dignified the bare little sanctuary. The purple velvet pall that covered the casket hung in rich, heavy folds of solemn color, with its tarnished silver fringe touching the floor. The congregation of the Manorton church had long admired the church pall. It had cost a large sum of money in its time, but that was many years ago. There were elderly men and women in the church who had admired it when they were children. Then, its sumptuous velvet pile, its depth of lovely color, the glory of its silver fringe, had appealed to their imaginations, suggesting mysterious, potent values which they could feel but not analyze. But the church pall had gradually been growing shabby. Its fringe was tarnished to dinginess. There were worn and faded spots in the royal purple; and long matted streaks showed in the folds in which it was laid away.

For two years now the ladies of the weekly



sewing society had been working to buy a new pall for the church. By means of ice cream festivals in summer, and a bazaar held shortly before Christmas, they had at last succeeded. The new modern pall of heavy black broadcloth, with lustrous silken fringe, had been ordered. Perry Herter might be expected to bring it down from Kirton any day. It seemed part of Silas Thompson's consistent ill luck in death as in life that it had not arrived in time to cover him.

When the cortege had passed out of the church to the peaceful sunlit burying ground at the rear, where Silas Thompson was to lie with the parents who had been lying there for half a century, Mrs. Lanson hurried home to make ready for the advent of the sewing society. The shabby sitting-room was in immaculate order; and with a sigh of relief, she caught up her mending basket and sat down to make some headway in the inexhaustible arrears of ragged stockings. Mrs. Lanson was an indefatigable darning. The fraying ingrain carpet, the table cover, the cushion on the minister's easy chair, all bore witness to her skill.

The rectory stood on a corner where a country road intersected the village street. Mrs. Lanson saw Morris Stetson and Millie Thompson come around the corner. As Millie walked buoyantly along the high bank, brushing through its fringe of goldenrod and Queen Anne's lace, the breeze-tossed wreaths of a woodbine swayed out from a dogwood tree and caught her brown hair and



twined around her shoulders. Her spirited, girlish form stood out against the clear blue sky. Her merry face was framed in the scarlet filigree of the vine's five-fingered leaves, its clinging tendrils, as she stood gaily restive while Morris disentangled her. Mrs. Lanson overheard her care-free laugh and smiled tenderly at the two, although she knew very well that they did not see her and that they were not in the least interested in the middle-aged woman at her humdrum darning in the rectory window.

Mrs. Haselton hurried home with little Joe. William Van Besten surprised her by rising from a chair on the porch. "Why, William!" she exclaimed.

"You see, I've been holding the fort in your absence," he explained. "I thought you would be back before long—you and Sally. Where is Sally?" He tried to conceal his disappointment at not seeing her.

"Sally's gone to the sewing society. I'm so sorry it's happened so." Mrs. Haselton spoke with sincere regret.

William's grim face made Annie feel apologetic, as though Sally had had no business to go to the sewing society when he had driven all the way from Kirton to see her. "She didn't want to go a bit, but Mrs. Lanson insisted, so that she couldn't very well help herself. I'm so sorry. But won't you come in?"

William deliberated.



"Oh, yes, do," Annie urged. "I don't believe she'll stay very long. I'm sure she'll be sorry to miss you."

More waiting. William looked grimmer than ever as he followed Annie into the house.

The church pall had served as such for the last time. The sexton brought it to the rectory as he had been directed. Mrs. Lanson shook it out and laid it on the table for examination by the members of the sewing society.

"It's dreadfully faded," she said.

The Sunday School needed a banner, and it had occurred to some bright mind that one might be created from the best of the pall. The ladies bent over it critically, wondering how they could contrive the banner, how they could expurgate the unsightly, faded streaks in the velvet. It was a difficult problem.

"Yes, we can do it, but it will have to be pieced," Sally Van Besten pronounced. She was recognized as authority, her judgment unquestioned.

"But the piecing's going to show," Mrs. Brownson said regretfully. "I'm afraid we can't make a very satisfactory job of it. Perhaps it isn't worth while to attempt it."

"Oh, I'm sure we can do it nicely," Sally said, all eager interest and enthusiasm, as was Sally's way whatever the subject in hand. "We can appliqué on a motto. That will hide the piecing. By the way, I've some buff broadcloth pieces at home that would be just the thing to cut into



letters. What do you think? I'd just as soon give it as not," she offered heartily.

"Trust Sally Haselton to find a way out," Mrs. Brownson said admiringly.

"I'll step home and get it right away," Sally said briskly and departed.

"Why, William!" He rose to greet her as she entered.

"I've been waiting for you," he said cheerfully. His eyes approved her.

"I'm so glad you've got home, Sally," Mrs. Haselton said heartily.

"But I haven't. I mean——" Sally said hastily, "I've got to go right back. I just came for some pieces. I'm sorry." She looked at William.

"Oh, let them get along without you. Send the pieces over by Neddy Thompson and stay, now you're here," Annie advised.

Gloom had fallen upon William.

"No, I'll have to go back myself," Sally maintained decidedly. "They need me. Excuse me, please." She looked very pretty, very positive, as she hurried upstairs to find the buff broadcloth. When she came down, she looked in at the sitting-room door. "I'm very sorry to go off like this, William, but you see I can't help it."

She was sorry, and yet she felt a wicked satisfaction in his discomfiture.

"Good afternoon," said William coldly.

The ladies left at work upon the pall, ripped off



the rusty fringe, its creased old lining. To even the least imaginative the task brought heart-stirrings of remembrance.

"Poor Mr. Thompson," Mrs. Lanson said. "I'm so sorry the new pall didn't get here in time."

"Weren't you surprised to see Harlan Morgan and Allen Mackenzie there to-day?" Mrs. Arnold asked. "I guess it's many a long day since they darkened a church door."

"Or Judge Burrall, either," Mrs. Brownson remarked. "I saw that he was one of the pall bearers."

"How a man of Judge Burrall's intellectual attainments, a worthy man too, can reconcile it with his conscience to neglect the things of religion the way he does is a mystery to me."

The other ladies looked safely condemnatory of Judge Burrall.

"I can remember when Morgan and Mackenzie, and Si Thompson and Phil Thompson and Judge Burrall, only he wasn't judge then, were all the greatest friends in the world," said old Mrs. Allan. "I don't believe Silas Thompson has had a word with any of them for ten years."

"How handsome Dr. Lanson looked to-day," Mrs. Brownson said suddenly. "I declare, Mrs. Lanson, I think the doctor grows better looking every year of his life!"

Mrs. Lanson smiled with happy pride. "The Doctor wore his new suit," she confided to the



sewing society. "We felt that he ought to have one for the meeting of the synod next week."

"I don't believe the Doctor needed a new suit half as much as she does," Mrs. Brownson whispered to her next neighbor. "I really think Mrs. Lanson is too unselfish."

"Wasn't it clever of Sally Van Besten to devise hiding the piecing with broadcloth letters?" Mrs. Lanson said appreciatively. "Now I never would have thought of that."

"Poor Sally!" sighed one of her friends. "I don't see how she ever manages to keep so cheerful."

"Do you suppose she knows?" Mrs. Arnold lowered her voice mysteriously.

"Knows what?" someone asked.

"Oh, all the horrid things people are saying about Mr. Van Besten's past life."

Rumors concerning William Van Besten's supposed misconduct had found their way to Manorton. Perry Herter for one had brought them down with the mailbag. The black sheep had heard William's character discussed in the hotel bar-room, and had held Mrs. Van Besten justified in her peculiar conduct.

"Poor Sally!" someone commented.

Sally was with them again, the roll of buff broadcloth in her hand. The ladies had not noticed her quick, light approach. The awkward lull in conversation betrayed that they were slightly disconcerted. Sally's manner had changed. "Here it is," she said briefly.



Mrs. Brownson rallied. "We didn't dare cut out the banner until you came, Sally. You do it. Here are the shears."

Sally proceeded to devote herself to the Sunday School banner, to the discussion which text to adopt. All the time she knew that she was working half-heartedly and that she was no longer at peace with herself. She was not entirely able to forget William's reproachful look. A slight discomfort gnawed her heart.

Mrs. Arnold insisted upon "Christ is Risen," as most economical of Sally Van Besten's broadcloth. As the other ladies quickly pointed out, this was adapted only to Easter, while the one banner must do duty upon all occasions.

"Oh be Joyful in the Lord" was finally adopted as suitable and cheerful, and capable of covering a great deal of piecing.

The shadows of the early autumn twilight admonished the sewing society that it was time to go home to tea. The Sunday School banner was laid aside on the bed on Mrs. Lanson's spare room for completion next week.

Sally noticed how tired Mrs. Lanson looked and lingered to help her pick up. No use hurrying home now. Of course William must have left long ago. Most unreasonably offended, too.

Mrs. Lanson stood by the table collecting the pretty purple left-over scraps. "Purple used to be my color when I was young and had pink cheeks." She smiled apologetically at thus



recalling that long vanished young girl who had had time and inclination for pretty things—the girl whom the minister had married.

“It would be becoming to you yet,” said Sally. An inspiration came to her. “Let me make you a bonnet from these scraps, Mrs. Lanson? Will you? Oh, yes, I can. They’re not a bit of good for anything else.”

Mrs. Lanson gave an embarrassed little laugh and a dull flush came to her cheeks. “My dear, I haven’t had a new bonnet for four years.”

“Then it’s high time you did,” Sally insisted. “Let me try. I’m sure it’s just as important that you should be well dressed as that the minister should.”

“Oh, no, it isn’t,” said Mrs. Lanson gently. “You needn’t look so pityingly, my dear, I’m a very happy woman, yes really, in spite of my old bonnet.” She regarded the well-worn cushions on the doctor’s easy chair, worn to such suggestive conformity with his figure that she could almost see him sitting there. She regarded her big work-basket, its pile of ragged hose continually augmented by her healthy, heedless boys. She regarded the unfortunate tear in her black skirt which always would show in spite of her skilful repairing. Then she looked brightly at Sally as one who felt that she deserved envy rather than pity. “You don’t understand, Sally. One has compensations.”

She looked thoughtful. “I wonder if it would



be wrong to make a bonnet out of the church pall?"

"Of course it isn't wrong. What else could you do with such scraps except thrust them into the rag-bag?" Sally argued.

"But perhaps I ought to speak to the Doctor first." Mrs. Lanson evidently inclined strongly toward the new bonnet.

"No, don't," Sally advised. "What does the minister know about bonnets? Let's surprise him. He'll be pleased, you see if he won't. Why, Joe is just delighted when Annie appears in something that's specially becoming."

A wistful self-knowledge tinged Mrs. Lanson's thin face. "Yes, but then Mrs. Haselton's so young and pretty."

Sally felt touched by the self-abnegation of the minister's wife. "So are you, only you don't half do yourself justice," she exclaimed warmly.

Mrs. Lanson laughed cheerfully. "You see, we're as poor as the proverbial parson's family. There's never a dollar to spare. I know it is disgraceful to wear that old bonnet in the face and eyes of the congregation any longer; but you see there are always so many things that the Doctor and the children absolutely need." Perhaps she caught a suggestion of unkindly criticism in Sally's face, divined toward whom it was directed. "But that isn't the Doctor's fault, or the boys'," she added quickly.

"Well, I'm coming over right after supper, and make that bonnet," Sally promised.



Mrs. Lanson followed Sally out to the front steps. "Sally dear, you mustn't mind what people say. I'm sure you overheard this afternoon and I'm dreadfully afraid you were hurt. But everybody thinks the world of you. Nobody blames you." She spoke fervently.

"No. That's just what's the trouble," Sally said stonily. "Mrs. Lanson, people are very cruel and unjust in what they say of Mr. Van Besten."

Mrs. Lanson looked at her affectionately. "Well, we all know what you are, Sally dear—a woman any man might be glad and proud to have for his wife."

"Oh, don't, please don't." Sally's voice was unsteady. The sound which she meant for a laugh sounded more like a sob. "I'm really horrid," she declared tremulously. "You haven't found it out, but I really am or it never would have happened. You see, you don't know what an awful idiot I was. If you did——" Her voice, vibrating with conviction, broke.

Mrs. Lanson longed to comfort. She laid a loving arm around Sally. "You mustn't mind what people say."

"I don't," said Sally proudly, and hurried away.

She hurried home. She closed the front gate quietly behind her. Perhaps she did not quite admit to herself that she was reconnoitering a possibility as she went up the path. The gas was lighted in the sitting-room and so was the lamp



upon the centre table. Sally, herself unseen, saw William Van Besten and her brother Joe sitting there together. Annie doubtless was preparing supper. William must be going to stay to supper. Sally smiled to herself out there in the twilight. It was rather gratifying that William should care to see her as much as that.

Still, as chance fell, it was unfortunate, too, for like Casabianca, Sally was resolute not to forsake the task in hand. As she went slowly up the steps, she was thinking busily: "At any rate I must be as nice to him as I possibly can until its time for me to start again."

At her entrance, William rose with a constrained smile. "I'm still here, you see."

"I'm very glad."

"What in the world made you stay so long, Sally, girl?" Joseph greeted her with cheerful impatience.

"I'm sorry to say that I haven't finished even now," Sally hastened to inform him. "I've promised to go back after supper."

"What! Really, Sally——" Mrs. Haselton spoke in helpless disapproval. "Why do you have to? I don't think you ought to. Here's William been waiting the whole afternoon. It's a shame!"

"That is of no consequence," William said quickly.

"Yes, it is," Sally said regretfully. "I'm dreadfully sorry, William—sorry things hap-



pened so unfortunately. If only this wasn't Saturday night. You see, it's something that ought to be done by Sunday, and I've promised to do it."

"I understand," William said, with severe self-control.

A gloom rested upon the company which Sally's effort at gay conversation did not entirely dispel. Shortly after they had left the supper table, William Van Besten said good night.

"It seems horrid of me to leave you in this unceremonious way," Sally said, with anxious kindness, "but you see duty calls." She smiled propitiatingly. "William, I hope you aren't vexed?"

"No. I should be very sorry to disarrange your plans."

"Come again when it isn't sewing society day," Sally bade. "I'll try to do better."

"Thank you, Sally," William said stiffly.



## CHAPTER XII

### A BLACK SHEEP FALLS OUT

**W**ILLIAM VAN BESTEN needed nothing to remind him of Manorton. Yet, singularly enough, reminder of that pleasant hamlet came to him every day. He saw Perry Herter's mail-wagon jogging through the street, or Manorton customers came to the store. The morning that Judge Burrall overtook him on the way into Kirton and walked along with him, almost the first thing the Judge said was: "I'm obliged to drive down to Manorton this afternoon."

"You don't get down that way very often, I suppose," William said carelessly.

"No, Mr. Harlan Morgan has sent for me. He is seriously ill, or he thinks so at any rate, and he wants a legal adviser about some matter or other." The Judge sighed. "Strange how folks drift apart. Morgan and I used to be much together." He sighed again.

"How are you going? Let me drive you down," William offered with alacrity. It was only three days since his last call upon the



Haselton's and he had not meant to return quite so soon. But circumstances alter cases.

The Judge demurred politely. "Very good of you, but I hardly like to involve you—I may be detained—you might have a tedious wait——"

"I shan't mind waiting," William said decidedly. "Yes, I'll take you down with pleasure. My horse isn't exercised half enough and I'll enjoy the drive. What time shall we start?"

His clerks regarded him with surprise as he passed through the store to his office. For Mr. Van Besten omitted his usual tour of inspection, and he was humming, actually humming to himself.

"I don't suppose I'll be wanted here over an hour," Judge Burrall said as he and William Van Besten stopped in front of the Manorton hotel. The Judge looked sad and thoughtful, as though feeling the weight of the years that had separated him from his one-time friend.

"Pray suit your own convenience, Judge," William told him politely. "Meantime, I'll look around a little, and pay a call. I'm not in the slightest hurry. You'll probably find me somewhere about the hotel whenever you wish to start."

The Judge entered the bar-room. The circle there, to whom time was nothing, lazily expectant of any happening, had an unusually sober aspect that afternoon. Most of them had some slight acquaintance with Judge Burrall. They nodded recognition.



Mr. Stetson, the proprietor of the hotel, stood leaning nonchalantly on the bar. The Judge walked up to him. "Good afternoon. How is Mr. Morgan?" he asked.

Mr. Stetson shook his head forebodingly. "I guess Mr. Morgan's a pretty sick man. The doctor's just left. He said he'd look in again presently. I don't believe he thinks there's much chance of his ever getting up again."

"Is it possible that it's as bad as that?" The Judge felt a sudden shock, a sudden sense of impending loss, which was singular, as he had not been intimate with Harlan Morgan for over thirty years. "Who takes care of him?"

"He's taken care of all right," Mr. Stetson assured him. "We all lend a hand. Mr. Mackenzie, he's with him most all the while. Mrs. Van Besten, she's here a good deal, too. Morris, my son, and I do what we can to make him comfortable. He doesn't lack for care, if that would cure him. But it won't."

"I wonder if he's well enough to see me. Will you send up word I'm here?" the Judge requested shortly and sat down in the bar-room to wait.

Meantime, William Van Besten walked over to the Haselton's and rang the bell. Mrs. Haselton opened the door. "How do you do, William," she said, with an involuntary look of surprise. "Come right in."

William looked quickly about as he obeyed.



"Sally's out, but she won't be gone long. I expect her home every minute."

"Where has she gone?" asked William, as he sat down.

"She is over at the hotel, helping take care of Mr. Morgan. He's very sick, you know. I'm afraid he isn't going to get well."

"That's too bad," William said, with entirely perfunctory sympathy. What did he care whether old Harlan Morgan lived or died? What he really felt was too bad was that Sally should always be engaged with something else, somebody else. Why didn't she stay home and attend to her own affairs?

Mr. Harlan Morgan was ill, very ill. When people asked the doctor how his patient was, the doctor pursed up his lips ominously and answered: "He may pull through this time," in a way that left no doubt of his opinion. To a few, the doctor said confidentially: "Of course his habits are against him. His constitution is entirely undermined."

Mr. Allen Mackenzie was a pitiful figure in the eyes of Manorton as he went desolately alone between his house and the hotel. He was not seen often, for he spent most of his time at the hotel, sitting hour after hour in his friend's dreary little bedchamber.

The two men had not a great deal to say to each other. Their eyes avoided meeting. Once, as Allen Mackenzie sat there, miserably pre-



tending to look out of the window, the sick man raised his head from the pillow. "Well, Al, I guess the game's about played out," he said jocularly.

"Don't talk like that. You're better. The doctor said this morning the fever had gone down." Allen Mackenzie's voice was rough with pain.

"Shucks!" said Morgan, dropping his feeble head back upon the pillow.

Acquaintances were kind. They sent messages of sympathy or wine jelly. "They're kind enough now that they're going to get rid of me," the invalid growled. He did not mean the bitter speech to apply to his friends Allen Mackenzie or Millie Thompson or Sally Van Besten.

The invalid watched the dejected figure by the window. "Al."

"Yes, Harl."

"Don't sit there any longer. Go along out. Take a walk. Get some air in your lungs, man. Isn't it bad enough for one of us to be penned up in this miserable coop?"

"I'd rather stay."

The sick man moved restlessly from side to side. "Go along and get some fresh air. The girls will look after me. I'll promise not to give up the ship while you're gone."

"Don't joke about that," groaned Allen Mackenzie.

The eyes of the two men met in a look that



penetrated all subterfuge on either side. Allen Mackenzie left the room.

"It's time for your medicine," Sally said. She slipped her vigorous arm gently under his pillow and lifted his head, pillow and all. She did not understand the smile with which he accepted her ministrations. Neither she nor Millie had ever realized how very singular it seemed to Harlan Morgan to have these kind, tender women doing for him—for him who had lived untended so many years.

His eyes unnaturally bright, under bony emaciated brows, looked into her eager face with a sort of eager appeal.

"I got rid of Al on purpose to have a word with you two."

"Did you, Mr. Morgan? Is there something you'd like to have us do?"

"Yes," he said energetically. "You two'll have to look after him you know, when—when this is over."

"You may be sure we will." Her face grew suffused with sympathy as she bent over him.

Millie, too, had come to the bedside. "Of course we'll do everything we can for Uncle Al. But you mustn't feel discouraged about yourself, Mr. Morgan. You'll soon be better."

Her honest eyes fell before his penetrating look. She had the shamed feeling of one detected in deceit. "You'll never make a good liar, my dear," he told her cheerfully. "I'll soon be dead. You can't look me in the face and say you don't



know it. There, there, my child. Never mind. I didn't mean to make you feel badly. I know how kind you mean to be. But what's the use of talking about me? I'm a back number." He pursed up his lips as though he were going to whistle. Then he went on with obvious effort to be matter of fact. "You see, your Uncle Al is bound to miss me. We've had the habit of each other so long. I hope you'll do all you can to make him forget how lonely he is."

Millie touched his hand tenderly with her own. "Yes, indeed, I will. You needn't worry about that," she answered him fervently. "We'll get Uncle Al to come and live with Morris and me. He shan't stay in that dreary old house all by himself."

But Mr. Morgan shook his restless head. "No, no, that isn't what he'll want. He wouldn't be happy to do that. He'd think himself a burden. No, it's much wiser for him to keep on in his own independent way. Only let him have the run of your house, and encourage him to feel that somebody cares about him. That's the best you can do for him, and it's a great deal."

"What's that?" He looked eagerly toward the door at the sound of a tap.

When Sally opened the door he strained his ears to catch the whispered announcement. "Judge Burrall? That's good. That's good. I'm glad he's got here. Tell 'em to wait five minutes and then show him up."



The announcement seemed to put new life into him. A tinge of color spread over his sharpened features. He glanced critically around the dingy, characterless little room. Sally Van Besten had spread fair linen covers on stands and dresser. "Is the room decent?" he questioned eagerly. "Here, give me a clean handkerchief, will you, Mrs. Van Besten? You and Millie won't mind if I ask you and Millie to leave us? It's just a little matter of business, you see."

With his accustomed professional urbanity sitting easily upon him, looking, as always, confident, well dressed, successful, Judge Burrall came into the sick-room. He seemed to take up a good deal of the small space as he came forward.

"Good afternoon, Morgan. I had your note and here I am, you see. Very sorry to find you in bed."

"Glad to see you, Judge. Very good of you to come so promptly."

As the Judge took the thin hand the other held out, he felt a strong impulse of pity for this old friend, once as promising a youth as he himself had been, who yet had made so pronounced a failure of his life.

"How are you to-day?"

Harlan Morgan's answering smile had a tinge of triumphant acquiescence to the will of the Powers.

"Well, Judge, I guess I've pretty nearly reached the end of my tether."

"Oh, you mustn't feel that way. You mustn't



lose heart, man. You must keep up your courage. That's half the battle, you know." The Judge's kindly platitudes sounded cheap and pitiful in his own ears. He found himself unable to go on in this vein of meaningless encouragement. His manner became simple and sincere as he drew a chair up to the bedside and sat down.

"What is there I can do for you, Harl?"

The sick man stared up at him thoughtfully, his brow seamed with reflections. Finally he said slowly, "Of course, I have precious little to leave, but still there is a little something. Al thinks I want it to go to Phil's girl, Millie. If I said a word about giving it to him, he'd flare up at once and declare he wouldn't have it. Al is very peculiar about such things, you know. It's only a miserable pittance anyway. It'll seem hardly worth bothering about to you." He gave his successful contemporary a look of proud humiliation. "But it's enough to ease things up considerably for Al. I want the matter fixed up without his knowing anything about it."

He moved uneasily, oppressed by his helplessness. His long, delicate, artist fingers toyed nervously with the bed-clothes.

"I drew up a kind of last will and testament myself when I was first taken ill. I'll have to ask you to wait on yourself if you will be so good. It's in that writing desk on top of the wardrobe. If you'll just reach it down. Yes, that's it, thank



you. Look it over, will you, and see if it's all right?"

As the Judge slowly read the document, the other watched his face.

"Yes, that appears perfectly correct. It is very clearly expressed." The Judge refolded the paper. "You're a lawyer spoiled, Harl," he complimented.

Harlan Morgan uttered a quick sigh. "I'm whatever I was meant to be—spoiled, God knows."

"This will has to be signed and witnessed," the Judge reminded him.

"Yes, I know it has. Call in some of the Stetsons, will you. And see here, Ned, will you take charge of it yourself until it's wanted?"

"Yes, I will, willingly; and if there's anything else I can do, Harl——" The old friendship was alive in the steady straightforward look the two men gave each other.

Meantime, Mrs. Haselton was doing her amiable best to entertain her visitor, but William was visibly absent-minded. He forgot to respond to her remarks, and then recollecting himself, answered so abruptly that he almost made her jump. Happily he did not have to wait long.

"There she is!" Annie exclaimed in accents of relief.

With a sober, downcast look at the world, Sally walked briskly up the path. Her mind was filled with sorrowful thought for the two old



friends now facing separation, of the long ostracism in which they had lived.

"Oh, I wonder why we aren't always good and kind and forbearing to each other, with this—this hanging over us all the time," she thought passionately. Tears came smarting to her eyes at recollection of the tragic, silent patience with which Allen Mackenzie watched his friend. Sally swallowed down the useless tears. She forced herself to think about the accumulation of neglected work waiting for her upstairs. "I must hustle. I mustn't waste another minute or I'll never be able to catch up."

"Sally, William's here," Annie called to her from the parlor.

William here again so soon! Sally's soberness fled. She came brightly to greet him. Annie, with sense of happy relief, went off to carry out her own little plans for the afternoon.

William showed some disinclination to part with Sally's hand, so she drew it sedately away.

"I hear you've been acting as sick nurse," he said.

"Yes, a little." Sally sighed. "William, isn't it pitiful to be ill, dying, in a dreary, unhomelike place like a hotel? The Stetsons mean to be kind. They are kind, but it's so dreary! Well, let's talk about something more cheerful."

Sally put up both hands and adjusted her glossy brown braids. "The wind has made me dreadfully untidy."



William looked at her steadily.

"Gracious, William! You mustn't stare me out of countenance like that," she gaily complained.

In the Haselton parlor, two pleasantly occupied people quite lost sight of their responsibilities to the rest of the world. Upstairs, Sally's work still lay unfinished. Sally was usually prompt and conscientious, but to-day she was basely sacrificing on the altar of William the convenience of her true and tried patrons. She did jump up guiltily when the front gate banged.

"Oh, dear, there come those people to be fitted! I'm not a bit ready for them either."

"Tell them so and let them go home," William advised.

She laughed at the suggestion.

"Oh, no, I can't do that, William; you'll have to excuse me for a little while. I'll call Annie to entertain you."

"No, don't. I can entertain myself. You won't be very long?" His look was a request.

"Not very. Help yourself to a book, if you care about reading."

Her manner was kind, apologetic.

Out in the front yard the two ladies had paused to admire Mrs. Haselton's flowers. William had risen. He came close to her, caught up her hand lightly, and looked into her face, with his own very close to it.

"No, please don't be long," he said, with a



kind of jesting entreaty that was serious too. "Don't forget all about me waiting for you down here."

Sally breathed quickly. She looked back at him in a startled way. Then, "William, hush!" she said quickly, for the front door was opening. He still held her hand. "Really, William, they'll see you!" She shut him carefully into the parlor as she went away.

William, left to himself, did not read. He walked up and down the room or stared out of the windows. He could hear faintly the rise and fall of earnest voices and the tread of feet in the room overhead. Now and then he pulled out his watch. Why did those women stay so long? What could they be about all this while? William's expression grew grimmer and grimmer as he waited. For a busy man he was certainly doing a good deal of waiting these days. William picked up his hat uncertainly. Well, he needn't wait. Why not hunt up Annie and explain that he'd leave his good-bye for Sally and step over to the hotel? Still he waited.

Sally was trying to be as expeditious as possible. Mrs. Brownson and Mrs. Wynne saw no reason for haste. Weighty matters concerning their new dresses had to be decided. That accomplished, they insisted upon discussing Mr. Morgan's illness and what was going to become of Allen Mackenzie. Sally had difficulty in concealing her impatience.



They went away at last. Sally returned to the parlor. There was no denying that William looked cross.

"Didn't they stay an unconscionable time?" she began brightly. "I thought they wouldn't go until they discussed everything under the shining sun." William felt that Sally was charming in her frank effort to mollify. He was aware of contradictions within himself. The pleasantest course would be to yield to this bright, propitiating kindness. Sally had said it was not her fault. Of course it was not her fault. Yet something within William refused to be so easily mollified, to lose sight of the fact that other affairs, her work, her kind acts to others, took precedence of him. So the easy, cheerful William, with whom companionship had been so pleasant the last time, and the time before that, and the time before that, quite disappeared. He found no fault, but his manner was constrained and coldly courteous. With amused vexation, she perceived his change of mood.

William rose stiffly. "I ought not to keep Judge Burrall waiting any longer."

"Judge Burrall?" She looked surprised.

"He's over at the hotel," William concisely explained. "I drove him down. Mr. Morgan sent for him, I believe."

"He wants me to understand that he didn't come just on purpose to see me," Sally thought. "Come again when you can. I'll try not to be



so busy next time." Surely she was making all possible amends.

"Thank you." William tried to smile naturally.

Sally looked after him with an odd mingling of amusement and disappointment.

William, for his part, as he went after his horse, knew that he would have to come soon again if only to obliterate the unsatisfactory impression of this call. No sooner was he away from her than he was shamed of himself for his own churlishness.



## CHAPTER XIII

### AN INTERRUPTED REPAST

“**M**R. VAN BESTEN, that invoice from New York has come.”

“Very well,” William answered shortly.

The clerk hesitated. “Do you want it opened now or left until you can attend to it yourself?”

In a manner restive of interruption, Mr. Van Besten pulled a sheaf of papers from a pigeon hole of his desk. He selected one and held it out. “Get them opened. Here’s the bill. Check off the items as you get them out. Make sure everything’s all right. First tell Tom to go to the stable and fetch my horse around.”

“Very well, sir.”

William turned back to his work. He had sat at his desk all the morning, had neglected nothing of the wonted routine. He did not mean to sit there any longer. The tingling autumn sunshine called him. He meant to drive down to Manorton and call on Sally. He thoughtfully, clear-sightedly reviewed the situation between himself and her. A very pleasant friendship. That was what they



had established and what he wished to maintain. For there were reasons,—William set his lips,—potent reasons why there could be no resumption of the old relationship. He had often reviewed them of late, at home alone in the evening. Once he uttered a fierce groan and struck his hand down on the table with a bang that roused the yellow cats from their serene slumbers. There were limitations, but what he might have, he would take. This habit of thinking: “I wonder what Sally would say to that? I must tell Sally. I’ll go down and have a talk with Sally,” was strengthening very fast. It warmed his days with expectancy. How buoyant she was. How sensible. She would not misunderstand. She had defined her own position so clearly—made a busy, useful life for herself. Life was a compromise at best. What he wanted more than anything else at the moment was to see her, see that odd brightening of her eyes when she offered him her hand, sit with her for an hour or so in the homelike room, and forget other things.

As he drove along, he saw a group of boys thrashing a walnut tree. The nuts pelted down like hail. He passed a group of chestnut trees. Their leaves were turning sere, but their clustering burrs were still green. The burrs were fast opening and shedding the plump, glossy nuts from their white satin linings. William had not been nutting since he was a boy. It occurred to him that he would like to persuade Sally forth



upon one of these gold-flecked afternoons to act as though they were boy and girl again. They would wade noisily through russet leaves and he would open recalcitrant burrs with a stone for a hammer. Sally must bring a bag or a basket, and they would laugh and be merry while they harvested. Sally would throw herself wholeheartedly into the sport. She would work as though to collect as many chestnuts as possible was her aim in life. Her cheeks would grow bright with air and exercise. She would be merry and brisk. Such an afternoon with Sally in the fields would be exhilaration to a man.

What was it that set her apart from every other woman, endowed her with peculiar charm? William did not know.

When they met, William regarded her quickly to see if he were welcome. She never told him he was, but face and hand gave him the assurance he craved. It was astonishing how much they found to say to each other.

Why did his pulse beat so fast when she took little intrusive Joe to her breast, and her face bending over him, grow so beautifully tender? He could not bear to look on any longer. She looked up, startled by his abrupt movement, for he took to walking quickly up and down the room, and his long arms looked tense, unnatural. She did not know that he felt a fierce desire to oust little Joe and clasp her in his arms. She set the boy down on the floor with a kiss. "Run



away, darling, and see what mother's doing." Noting William's perturbed expression, she wondered if he disliked children.

"When are you going to come up and let me show you my collection?"

With a delicious sense of domination, Sally perceived the earnestness of the question. Ah! he wanted her up there! The simple pleasure of showing her over his old house was matter of importance to him. He urged her coming. His look was singularly eager. It called her to look at him. "Let me read what is in your mind," it seemed to demand. Sometimes his look aroused her antagonism, made her brightly baffling as though she would convey: "No, no,—you have no right to know."

Sally would not yield even when it would have been easier to do so. Sometimes it was very hard not to yield, to withhold her hand from the strong hand so ready to grasp it. She wanted to keep their intercourse on the basis of a light, easy friendliness. It was welcome to her, this return of William, after their years of separation. What did it mean? She stifled the question. She did not want to know. But she realized that before his return, her days of uninterrupted dressmaking had been intolerably humdrum. Of course, people noticed William's visits. Sally could imagine the things they must be saying. She developed a certain brazenness of disregard. She felt airily superior to her customers' complaints, when



visiting with William put business out of gear. Of course she ought to have been ready. It was abominable to disappoint people, and yet she knew that if William came inopportunately she might do so again. This sure pleasure that had fallen upon her she could not afford to throw away. Sally had her little theories concerning it. After awhile she and William would settle down into a satisfying jog trot kind of friendship saved out of the wreck of other things. Or was another solution possible? She pushed the thought away. All she asked at the moment was to drift on in this new companionship.

"When will you come?"

Involuntarily Sally pushed back her chair a little in retreating from his look.

"Some day soon."

"Come to-morrow, do come to-morrow. Please." William was as coaxing as though she were a child.

Sally gazed at him abstractedly as her mind ran over her professional cares—the fittings that would have to be postponed, the dress that was to have been finished this week. Mrs. Wynne would have to wait a little longer. Sally believed in all sincerity that it was more important in the general scheme of things that she and William should have a happy day than that the gown should be delivered on schedule time. But she toyed with William's desire.

"My customers!"

"Tell them to keep away. Just for a day.,



Won't you do as much as that?" He would not accept the hint of her little withdrawal. He drew his chair close to hers again. When he spoke again his voice was less clear, less playful. "I want you to come,—so much," he whispered huskily. "Won't you come?"

Sally drew a quick breath. What singular spell was enervating her?

"Yes, I will come," she promised softly.

Some quick instinct of revolt prompted her change the atmosphere. "See here, William. Listen. I don't want you to think me rude or inhospitable. Of course, it's very pleasant to sit here chatting with you." She smiled. "I'd much rather, than go upstairs and toil and moil over people's clothes. But then we mustn't forget that I'm a business woman. I'm primarily a dressmaker, and I haven't any right to shirk my work. Now, have I?"

"I suppose not," William admitted reluctantly. "Not usually, that is. But then everybody does treat with resolution once in awhile. Suppose you go on neglecting business just for this afternoon," he suggested hopefully.

"And again to-morrow? William Van Besten, that doesn't sound a bit like you. You would never let your business suffer so that you could be lazy and enjoy yourself. You would do what you thought was your duty."

"I might not. I'm only a man, you know, not a wooden automaton. I do wrong. I make



mistakes. I can't profess to do the right and best thing always. I make mistakes. I have made mistakes——" William stopped abruptly.

Sally was puzzled by the sudden infusion of seriousness in his manner.

"Well, if I'm to go to Kirton to-morrow, you'll have to let me go and work now," she declared.

William rose obediently. "I'll look for you in the morning then. You'll drive up with the mail wagon?"

The next morning, Sally, rosy and cheerful, clad in her favorite blue, entered the store.

As William came to meet her he looked less sedate than usual, his gray eyes sparkling. "I was on the lookout for you. I'm going to take you to the house in my buggy. Are you ready?"

"Indeed I'm not," she protested cheerfully. "Why, I've just this minute come. Look at that." She unfurled a long list of shopping commissions.

"Do you really need to get all those things to-day?" he enquired discontentedly.

"I don't think you're a very enterprising merchant," Sally laughed. "You ought to encourage me to buy. Never mind. I shan't be very long."

It really was not easy to match samples, to decide between buttons, with William hovering near, so obviously impatient. Sally hurried all she could. But William thought her exasperatingly absorbed in matters of unimportant detail.

But William had been learning how to wait patiently. It really was not very long before



Sally nodded to him that she was ready. The clerks stared after their employer as he helped Sally into the buggy. Then he stepped in himself and drove off. With a farcical imitation of being limp with astonishment, a clerk at the drug goods counter threw himself against the shelves of goods. "Fan me!" he besought his associates.

A short drive brought William and Sally to the Van Besten house. The front door was still barred by the Dutch Kaas, so William conducted her around to the side door. Remembering when she had been here last, a sense of guilt fell upon Sally. William noticed her slight confusion.

Warm air gushed out at them as he opened the door. "Whew! Isn't it hot? Will you excuse me a minute while I go down cellar and turn off the heat? You see, I was afraid you might find the rooms chilly, so I started a furnace fire this morning," William told her.

Left to herself in the sitting-room, Sally looked around her for signs of William's daily life.

William joined her. He looked at her with delight. "Come and tell me what you think of my dining-room furniture."

"I think it's beautiful," Sally said heartily.

William looked at her in surprise. "Why, you haven't seen it yet. Come look at it."

Impulsive Sally bit her lip as she followed him into the dining-room. If she stayed here long she would surely betray herself, reveal that pre-



vious unlawful visit. The anxiety made her preoccupied.

"Now I think you've seen everything," William said finally. He felt a change in her manner and grew anxious. Was he boring her?

Sally roused herself. "I've enjoyed seeing it all ever so much. I always did love handsome old things. I think you've shown a great deal of taste in your selection, William."

William looked pleased. "I'll tell you what I propose to do next. We'll drive back to Kirton and have some lunch at the hotel. Then if you'll let me, I'll take you home."

The Kirton hotel did not allure Sally. The old house, with its strange furnishings, did. "Why don't you give me a lunch here?" she suggested gaily. "I'd really like to eat a meal from that magnificent mahogany."

"Would you? Well, then, you shall. But you'll have to help me forage. I'm afraid there isn't anything in the house fit to set before you," he said anxiously.

"Of course I'll help."

"First, let's see what there is out here." William opened the door into the cold closet beyond the kitchen. The latch was still adorned with a piece of his suspender. "But you mustn't make fun of my housekeeping."

"No, I won't." Sally gathered her skirt close about her and stepped down into the long narrow closet between its rows of shelves.



"What's in the paper bag? Eggs? William, I'll make an omelet. You've butter, haven't you? Any bread?"

"I guess there's some bread in that tin box, but I'm afraid it's rather stale," William said doubtfully.

"Never mind, we don't want it. I'll stir up some popovers. They don't take long to bake. William, you like popovers, don't you?"

"I do," said William earnestly.

"Well, hurry up the kitchen fire then. Get the oven hot as quick as you can."

"I'm afraid you'll spoil your pretty dress." William glanced admiringly at the blue costume.

"No, I won't. You just get me the biggest towel you have and I'll pin it over my dress," she told him. "Tell me, is there anything else to eat in this house?"

"Come down cellar and see for yourself," William answered happily.

He fell into quite a poetical mood as he went at her side. She seemed so like a flower brightening the dim cellar, the dull house. He could not bear to remember that very soon she would go away.

Sally was not in a poetical mood. "I smell ham." She went sniffing about the cellar. "William, that's just what we want with our omelet, a slice of broiled ham. Aren't we going to have a scrumptious lunch? But we must get things going. Hurry up. I'm so hungry."



"Coffee, let's have coffee," he suggested.

"By all means," she agreed.

William started the kitchen fire. They set gaily to work. Together they set the table.

"But you need doilies," Sallie commented.

"William, I shall make you a present of a set of doilies. It's wicked to cover up that beautiful table with a tablecloth, and it's wicked to set hot dishes on the wood. Never mind. We'll use folded napkins for to-day." She was fertile in resource. William admiringly obeyed her suggestion. They went out together into the garden back of the house, and gathered from under frost-bitten leaves fragrant green parsley to garnish the omelet.

"Now for the popovers. Where do you keep your flour, William?" Sally turned back her sleeves from her capable white hands. Her dexterous activity fascinated William.

While they were waiting for the popovers to bake, Sally went into the dining-room and gave the carpet a hasty scrutiny.

"What are you looking for?" William asked.

"Nothing," answered Sally. That was true. There was no longer any grease spot under the table. The benzine had done its work.

"Excuse me just a minute." William lighted a candle and hurried down cellar. Sally was beginning to wonder what he was about down there, when a crash of breaking glass, a dismayed exclamation, resounded through the house.



"What is it? What have you done?" she cried running down the cellar stairs. William's candle made a very little point of light from the depth of the inner cellar. He looked toward her sheepishly. In his haste in trying to extricate a particular bottle of his mother's home-made wine, he had heedlessly knocked off a couple of bottles from the edge of the shelf. The wine had splashed over him as the bottles fell against each other. It lay ruddily on the concrete floor with a litter of broken glass.

Quick as a flash Sally stripped off her towel apron. "Here, William. Wipe your coat as quick as you can before it soaks in." She drew close and examined the cloth anxiously, and laid her fingers lightly against the wetness. Then she looked up at him. "I don't believe it's going to spot," she assured him earnestly.

"I don't care whether it does or not," William said recklessly. He looked so mischievously disposed to lay hands upon her that Sally flushed and drew back.

"What a mess!" she exclaimed, looking down at the floor. "Careless fellow!" she reproved. Her look, her tone, made their merry comradery all at once more intimate.

"My popovers! My popovers! in the oven all this time!" She rushed away and William hurried after her.

"There, what do you think of those?" She held out a plate heaped high with golden brown



popovers. Her cheeks were flushed from proximity with the kitchen fire. Short locks of her bright hair lay moist on her temples. The broiled ham filled the air with an appetizing aroma.

"I only hope they'll taste as good as they look," William said solemnly. "Do you suppose they can? It would be awful to have them turning out like California fruit, beautiful to look at and no flavor to amount to anything."

"Don't be alarmed. Set them on the table, will you please? Is the coffee ready? Oh, how good everything smells! I'm going to cook the omelet now, and then we'll feast." Her tone showed hearty anticipation of pleasure.

William carried the popovers into the dining-room as he was bidden. His brow was unruffled. The cares of everyday had fled away from this warm atmosphere of cheer.

"William, will you come and hold the dish for the omelet?" Sally called. "Why, who's that?"

For someone had knocked at the side door, a timid, yet peremptory rap. Sally's face clouded as she stood on the dining-room threshold. "I'll just keep out of sight in the kitchen," she said quickly. "You won't bring anyone in this way? It doesn't matter much, only people are so silly." She looked troubled.

"All right, Sally." William went to open the door. He felt no foreboding. He was light-hearted. Any interruption was bound to be irksome, but doubtless he could quickly dispose of



this one. He opened the door. Then he stepped back. His expression grew cold, repellant. He might have known. In an instant he had said passionately to himself that something like this was bound to happen sooner or later.

A young woman stepped hurriedly into the hall. She was tall, slender, agitated. Beautiful dark eyes confronted him tragically. Her red lips quivered.

“William!”

Her agitated voice woke no response in William. It hardened him. She went toward him swiftly, her hands outstretched, but William stood cold and inert.

She felt that she might not touch him.

Her hands fell back rebuffed. She sobbed out frantically. Her wild sobbing filled the rooms. Sally Van Besten heard it.



## CHAPTER XIV

### THE DAY OF DISILLUSION

“**H**USH, hush, Bessie!” William said imperatively. He had turned white. His eyes sternly troubled glanced toward the kitchen, then back to his visitor. Her arrival could not possibly have been more inopportune. In his sense of that fact, he was quite unconscious of his own austerity of manner. He did not know that the chill of his demeanor cut knife-like her quivering sensibilities. Yet her agony touched him.

“Bessie, Bessie! Please don’t feel so badly. What is it?”

Only a minute ago he had been as buoyantly lighthearted as a boy. His employes, his acquaintances of everyday, would hardly have recognized serious, austere Mr. Van Besten in the young man who laughed and jested as he merrily helped Sally to set the lunch table; but all at once life grew difficult again. The innocent trifling, the frank, unexacting companionship to which he had given himself with hearty unanalytic enjoyment, were after all not for him. He



himself had placed them beyond reach. A load—tons' weight—fell on his spirit, but he acted alertly. A moment long dreaded was at hand. He summoned his strength to meet it, but with a great impatience of the puzzlement of life. "This way. Come in here." He conducted her swiftly into the sitting-room and closed the door.

She struggled to control her sobs.

"Now, what is it?" His voice was stern. The weeping woman thought that the sternness was for her, but she was mistaken. It was for himself, because he felt for her wretchedness and knew that he had no power of comfort in him. Her frank grief stung him. Never before in all his life had William Van Besten known such sickening self-despite. He suffered, but he welcomed the smart because it seemed in some measure to expiate. Grim self-knowledge told him that he ought to suffer.

With a great effort she controlled herself and lifted her drenched, quivering face.

"Oh, William, are you angry because I've come?" she asked piteously.

William was silent. At that moment he felt pretence impossible.

"Are you?" she persisted.

"No, of course not," he answered sharply. "But I don't think it was a very wise thing to do. Someone may have noticed you. Hasn't there been gossip enough already without inviting more?"



"Is that all? What difference does that make? I've stopped thinking of cheap things like that. I don't care."

Her defiance reproached his coward caution. They stood mutely questioning each other. In her face he read mingled hope and dread, and appeal to him to be good to her, to stop making her shiver by his impenetrable coldness. William was remembering Sally waiting for this mysterious interview to end, waiting for the pleasant feasting that they had promised themselves, and which William knew was hopelessly embittered for him now.

"Well, what is it?" he repeated. Impatience cropped through the dry patience of his tone. As he awaited her answer he noted in a dispassionate way that in spite of tears and dishevelment she was beautiful. Her dark hair framed exquisitely her delicate face. Her great sorrowful, questioning eyes looked at him from under dark curling lashes. William perceived her beauty, but it no longer had power to stir him. He saw her lips quiver, saw her seek restraint, then toss it recklessly aside.

"You ask me that!" There was a long quivering pause. Then her voice, low and tremulous, "I've never meant to be exacting, but you haven't been near me for nearly two weeks. Have you been out of town?" she asked, with sudden change of tone, sudden ray of hope.

"No," said William.



‘Every day, every night, I thought you’d surely come. I’ve waited and waited until I couldn’t bear it any longer. That last time you seemed changed. I couldn’t tell what was the matter, but I felt the difference. I was sure there was a difference. Then you stopped coming. No word from you. Nothing. Why, what do you think a woman’s made of?’ Her voice rose in indignation.

‘You’re right. It was not the way to treat you, Bessie. You are right to be angry.’

‘But I’m not angry, only hurt, William. Hurt.’ She stopped abruptly, waiting for a reassurance that did not come. She did not try to hide that she longed to forgive, to condone, if only he would express some desire to be forgiven. But she could make nothing of William’s resolute passivity.

She hurried on with her explanation. ‘At last I thought you must be ill. I went to your store and they told me you’d gone home. I couldn’t go on like that another day. I had to know. So I came on here. William, tell me why you’re so—so different?’

But William could find no words. He did not know how to tell this throbbing, suffering creature the simple truth, which yet it was inevitable that she should know. He could not face the yearning in her dark eyes. His sternness dropped away and his manner grew singularly gentle. But it was a gentleness which made him more remote



to the aching sense of the woman who sought him. All the time he was remembering Sally waiting and wondering.

"Sit down, Bessie. Yes, dear, you must," he insisted, with a touch of tenderness to which she yielded instantly. As he put her gently into an armchair and sat down beside her, her face quivered again and tears flooded her eyes. She bent toward him. "William, you can't think how lonely and anxious I've been. It's been a sickening time. I couldn't understand why you stayed away. I'm sure you're angry, but I don't know what I've done."

William drew back a little and regarded her sombrely. "You have done nothing, nothing at all. The fault is all mine, Bessie. I wish to God the pain could be all mine too." He spoke fiercely, hating himself for the evil he had wrought. A great light had burst from the cloudy heavens to reveal the true values of life. It revealed him to himself inmeshed in difficulties of his own creating. How hard that one could never sin, never expiate, alone. Always some other was involved.

She looked at him entreatingly, clinging to the arms of her chair as though in spirit she felt herself clinging to something else that was, in spite of all that she could do, slipping away from her very fast. She would not allow herself to accept the suggestion of his words, but she looked startled, frightened. She forced back her tears and grasped



composure. Then she looked up at him with a wavering, heart-breaking attempt at a smile. "I never meant to bore you by crying. I didn't mean to act this way, William. I know you hate scenes. You must forgive me. It's only because I was so worried and nervous. We'll forget all about it, shall we, and start fresh?" Her lips smiled tremulously, but her eyes were very sad.

William was heavily silent.

"William, you don't know how you frighten me when you act like this. Please don't be so strange. Please be natural."

Still he found no reassurance for her.

"William, have you taken to moralizing at this late date? What is the use. Don't let us make ourselves unhappy over what can't be helped. William, don't be good. Let's try to be happy. It harms no one. That's the best." She was very pretty, very pathetic, her lips inviting, still trying to smile. With all the power of her nature she was claiming him. He felt her claiming him and his own nature repudiating the claim.

"Bessie, I've done very wrong to meddle with your life in any way. If I knew how to undo what's been done, I would."

"But why?"

He did not answer.

"Think how beautiful it's been," she reminded. "You were so lonely in this dismal old house. You told me there wasn't a soul in the world who really cared for you. You tried to hide it, but



you really were very sad sometimes, William, when you used to come to me to cheer you up. And I did cheer you up, didn't I?"

Her voice wrung his heart. He lifted her hand to his lips. There was renunciation in the kiss, but she did not know it, and felt a little confused.

"And I was lonely too, dreadfully lonely after my husband died and I came back to Kirton to live with mother. Nobody will ever know how strange it seemed to find everything going on in the same old way when I felt so changed. I made up my mind that life was always going to be commonplace. All the rose color had faded out of mine. I wasn't very old, but I felt that I'd had my portion of good things. But I was resigned. I was getting along comfortably enough, even if I was lonely. Then you came."

William groaned. "I never should have come."

"Why not? Because you are married, you mean? I never thought of that after the first, and I don't believe you did. How could that really count when you'd never lived together? When she didn't care for you or you for her? Oh, you were very honorable! You told me right away, you know. But that didn't amount to much, telling me, when you went right on and made me care for you. I tried not to at first, but you did make me care."

"It was very wrong."

"No, it wasn't. I'm glad you came, William, but you did change everything. You don't think



I could go back now and be contented as I was before?" She leaned her passionate face toward him, but all in vain.

"William, you don't really think I'm horrid, do you?"

"I think you all that is sweet and womanly." He spoke with strong feeling. "I don't deserve to have you feel this way."

"But I can't help it," she said simply.

"There is a great deal in the world for anyone like you. You're sure to find interests, occupations." His words sounded weak, inadequate, cowardly in his own ears.

"What do you mean?" Her longing dark eyes probed for his meaning, yet refused to understand. William bent over quickly and laid his strong hand, his big throbbing palm, over the piteous, trembling little hand that clasped the chair arm.

"I would give anything on earth if there was anything I could do for you. I can't bear to feel that I cause you pain. Why can't I bear all the pain myself?"

"What do you mean? Please don't talk so strangely. Has anything happened? Are you trying to tell me that you don't care for me any longer?"

Her quivering voice filled him with anguish. He felt like a ruthless torturer, and all the time his heart bled pity for her. Yet, in spite of the pity, he felt too the unshakable resolve to have



done. For the end had come. The glamour had dissolved. This palpitating, suffering creature filled him with pity for her and shame for himself, but she no longer allured. The how and the why of it were beyond William's telling. He could not say to her that their relationship had never possessed the elements of permanency, although he knew that to be true. In seeking her he had sought the lesser values, mere sops to his loneliness, his dissatisfactions, his desires. If he had but had sense to wait for the higher values. But he had not, and therefore this aching sense of responsibility for the irretrievable possessed him.

Hope seemed to be slowly dying out of her as she sat limply leaning back in the cushioned chair. She looked drearily bewildered. "Oh, you can't have stopped caring like that," she said, in a slow wondering way. "Think, think back, William. Only such a little while ago. Can you forget?" Her voice sank to a whisper. Involuntarily she held out an entreating hand.

William knelt down beside the chair and took the hand into a firm clasp. "No, Bessie, whatever comes, be sure I shall never forget. If I wish to forget, I won't be able to."

Bessie was drearily surveying her surroundings. "This is the first time I've been in this house since I was a little girl and my mother brought me when she came to call on your mother. What a strange looking room it is. So many things."



But William felt no desire to show Bessie his collection.

"William, do you remember that first time we met after I came back? That's nearly three years ago. That time at the door of your store?"

Yes, he remembered that pretty vision of bright eyes and light laughter. Had he not evoked it often to brighten his colorless office before finally he sought her. It had come to him many and many a time, inviting, beckoning, before he had yielded.

"That was when I first asked you to call, but I hardly expected you'd come. I went home and told mother that William Van Besten hadn't changed a bit since we went to the high school. You were such a quiet, sedate boy, and generally you seemed so indifferent to girls. But we girls all looked up to you and liked you. And I never forgot the time we played those horrible kissing games at some children's party. You caught me and I fought hard to get away. But you were so much bigger and stronger than I was, and so determined. You rumpled my white dress and pulled the bow out of my pink sash and held me tight until you'd had your way and kissed me. I cried as though my heart was broken when you did let go. William, it isn't going to be like that again?"

All spirit seemed quenched in her as she lay huddled in the big chair where he had put her. Suddenly she started up and stretched out her



hands frantically. "It mustn't end like this! Don't let it. I won't be exacting. I will do anything you want."

But William looked back inflexibly. "Listen, Bessie. Don't you see it doesn't depend on me or on you? There are forces in the world so much bigger than you and me. They clutch us. We must yield."

She sat up, clasping her hands convulsively. "I wouldn't have believed I could be so abject. I've always had plenty of pride until now. Do you enjoy making me grovel?"

"Bessie! I beg of you! Don't say such things. Don't think them. Do you think there's no pain in this for me?"

"Well, I don't understand. What is it, who is it that's changed everything? Haven't I a right to know? Some other woman has come between us. I feel it. Hasn't there?"

"We couldn't go on. It was all wrong from the first. All mistaken."

Her lips curved scornfully. "Was it? You didn't always think so, did you? William, have you really gone back to her after the way she treated you? We heard you went to see her. I could hardly believe it. I thought you had some pride, some self-respect." She longed to sting him into some admission.

The discussion was taking a turn intolerable to William. "Why prolong this?" he said hastily. "Bessie, heap all the blame you will



upon me. It won't be more than I deserve."

She rose feebly. "How anxious you are to get rid of me, aren't you? My being here bothers you, interrupts. You looked as though you hated me when you opened the door."

"I did not mean it. You surprised me."

"Well, I will go now. Perhaps it was wrong to come."

She stood wavering, looking at him with final appeal, finding it hard to go away. She felt a great longing to keep William in her sight although his every word and look hurt her, reiterated that she had lost him. Hope still insisted that she might draw him back. For was she not just the same, just as worth caring for as ever? What, then, had snapped the spell?

William opened the sitting-room door. His alacrity stung her. "I'll see you soon," he said. "I have been meaning to come."

"Did you really mean to come?" She fixed her mournful eyes doubtingly upon him and shook her head. "Oh, once or twice, perhaps, at long intervals, to ease your conscience! But when once you get what you want, and are happy, you'll try to forget all about me. You won't seek a reminder of what you'll want to forget. But you said you wouldn't ever be able to forget, and that's true. When you're least expecting it, something will make you remember. Then you'll wince because you'll know that even if everybody does look up to you and if you have everything in



the world you want, you once acted basely. You can't get away from that knowledge. For it is base to desert a woman after you've made her depend on you and care for you. I hope you will suffer. I want you to suffer."

William stood squarely to the attack. He welcomed her wrath.

The dining-room door stood open. The autumn sunshine fell across the pretty table set for two. The golden-brown popovers were getting dry and cold. Bessie stopped short on the threshold and looked at the table. Her face grew rigid. A flame of jealousy blazed in her heart. She turned upon him. "What does this mean?" she asked, pointing to the table. "I knew there was some reason why you hated so to have me come. What did I interrupt?" She looked around in search of another presence. "Who are you expecting?"

"I am expecting no one," William answered stonily.

She turned blindly toward the door. He opened it. As she was passing swiftly out, he laid his hand upon her arm. "Bessie, forgive me. It hurts me, too."

"Don't touch me!" she flung back at him passionately, but through her quivering pride he read her longing to yield to the touch, to yield to his compulsion. He released her and watched her go down the path. She went swiftly, never once looking back, but he saw her stumble as she went.



## CHAPTER XV

### HOOR OF RECKONING

WILLIAM closed the door. He stood for an instant in the hall. Immediate resolution came to him. Grimly he squared his shoulders to meet the ordeal. Uneasy self-despite, a sensation new to him, impelled him to abase himself before the one whose good opinion he most valued. The many promptings which had guided him along a self-indulgent course looked puerile enough now before the havoc his self-indulgence had wrought. Well, Sally should judge him. He longed to have her. He meant to extenuate nothing of his folly and weakness and wrongdoing. The worst that there was to know about himself she should know. The resolution was based on something finer than his temperamental self-will. It held its own bitterness, a bitter self-knowledge that altered William's aspect. Not a trace of his old priggishness hung about this pale, determined-looking young man.

What had become of Sally? The house seemed appallingly quiet. Somehow he knew that she



was no longer in it. He felt so utterly alone. He strode through the dining-room to the kitchen. The serene yellow cats had it all to themselves. The luncheon dishes carefully covered were waiting on the hearth. In spite of his unhappy mood, William smiled involuntarily at sight of them. It was so exactly like Sally to cover the dishes in that provident fashion, even in the face of tragedy. Ah, Sally, Sally! He longed to put his arms around her and lean his abased man's head against her breast and feel her tender woman's arms around him, and find love and pardon and comfort. He felt a great need of her. The reminders of their gay hours together were unendurable. He left the kitchen hastily.

"Sally, Sally, where are you?" He called in a lifeless way that expected no answer. His glance into the parlor was a mere form. Then he remembered that she had laid her jacket on a chair in the hall and he returned there hastily to look for it. It was gone. William stood irresolute where to seek her next. He must find her. How much had she overheard? What was she fancying concerning him? He glanced at the clock. Probably at this moment she was in Perry Herter's mail wagon well started on her way to Manorton. She need not think that she was going to escape him that way. He would follow at once and have it out with her. He caught up his hat and coat and hurried out to catch the next trolley into Kirton to the stables where he kept his horse.



An acquaintance stopped him on the street. "Wait a minute, Van Besten. May I have a word with you?"

"Well, I'm in a great hurry, to tell the truth," William answered constrainedly. "Won't it keep till to-morrow? I'm trying to get away for a few hours. But any time to-morrow."

"Oh, all right then. I'll wait," the other answered cheerfully.

William had an ironical perception that he was acting as though compelled to catch a certain train. What difference could five minutes, ten minutes, make in the situation? Yet he knew that he was unwilling to sacrifice even that amount of time to anyone. As soon as his horse could be harnessed he set forth for Manorton.

For the first time since its erection, he drove past the Civic Building without seeing it. From the time it had first been planned, it had loomed before his imagination as a stately embodiment of all the vaguely realized, yet potent values of the Kirton life. Usually the harmony and beauty of its outward aspect calmed his chafed spirit, was a secret solace. William Van Besten loved his little native city with a silent loyalty that made it the one chosen spot on earth to him. He never could compare it to any other place except to the latter's disadvantage. He never returned to it after an absence without quiet jubilation that his lot had been cast here. Guiding his capable conduct of his own affairs, was a strong desire to leave



nothing undone of his obligations as a citizen of Kirton. For the good of Kirton as much as for his personal benefit, it had always gratified him that Van Besten's should be one of the chief ornaments of its business street. He sought to maintain the air of well-kept opulence about his home that it too might reflect credit upon the Kirton fashion of life. But to-day none of these considerations were present with him as he touched his horse with the whip and urged him on to Manorton. This time he never noticed the hoary chestnut trees shedding their glossy harvest. He was wondering how Sally would look, what she would say.

A most unpleasant sense of shamefacedness seized him as he walked up the Haselton path. Its outward manifestation was a resolute squaring of the shoulders, a closer compression of the lips. It occurred to him as quite possible that Joe's and Annie's friendly attitude toward him might have been altered by Sally's report of her visit. But that after all was of little consequence, he told himself. It was Sally's own attitude he longed to know. He listened eagerly, then disappointedly, to the steps coming toward the door.

When Mrs. Haselton opened the door, he saw only surprise and friendly concern in her countenance. "Why, William, is that you? Why, Sally went up to Kirton to-day. Didn't you see anything of her?"

"Isn't she home yet?" he asked.



"No, she isn't. I think she must have decided to spend the night with some of her friends up there. Sometimes she does, you know. Won't you come in?"

"Where do you think she'd be most likely to stay?"

"I can't tell you that. Perhaps she's gone to the McKinstry's, or to the Arnold's. She's very fond of them. Or she may have gone to Addie Armstrong's. There are half a dozen places where she may be."

Annie Haselton felt vaguely that there was stronger emotion than casual disappointment in William's troubled expression. He looked strangely disconcerted as he stood silent in the doorway.

"Don't stand there, William. Come into the house. Joe'll soon be back from the mill. Stay and have supper with us."

William roused himself. "Not to-night, thank you, Annie." But he lingered on the threshold.

Annie laughed out cheerfully. "Wait just a minute then till I stir my cornstarch. I'm afraid it will boil over if I leave it any longer. I wish you'd come in, William. Why should you stand there?"

But she found him still at the door when she returned from her swift mission to the kitchen. "When do you think she's likely to get home?"

"Oh, I guess she'll come along down with Perry Herter to-morrow. She can't stay away very long for she has such lots of work waiting for her."



"I must be going back," William said heavily. "Good-night, Annie."

With an impulse of sympathy for this obvious masculine dejection, Annie held out her hand. "See here, William," she smiled in arch apology for questioning, "you and Sally haven't gone and quarreled, have you?"

"No," said William hastily. The question seemed to act as an impetus.

Annie Haselton looked after him with a sense of mystification. "I'm sure something's wrong," she said to herself.

William drove slowly back to Kirton. Should he continue the quest? He deliberated. No. Better wait now until she was home. To persist in seeing her now might seem abject on his part. Nor did it seem advisable to beat up the houses of all the friends with whom she might be staying. Obviously, she intended to avoid him.

He went back to his store and tried for a time to give his thoughts to business. But whispering spirits of unrest called his attention. William sat back in his chair and looked with frowning concentration upon something remote from Main Street, Kirton. His clerks avoided interrupting him that afternoon.

He locked his desk and walked slowly back to his house. The chill of desolation enveloped him as he entered it. Now that he could do nothing for the moment, he found that the experiences of the afternoon had left him exhausted as by some



great physical strain. He could not endure the reminders of the dining-room, of the sitting-room. He turned into his long silent parlor, walking up and down between the ranks of ghostly furniture, throwing himself at full length on the slippery haircloth sofa. So many hours to be worn away before to-morrow. To-morrow Sally should evade him no longer. She must listen to his story. He longed fiercely for her to know all the good and the bad in him. She should understand the real William, have no longer any excuse for taking for granted some praiseworthy, fictitious character, the highly respected young business man.

After awhile, in sheer weariness of spirit, seeking employment, he went out to the dining-room and cleared away. He could not touch the interrupted feast. The yellow cats profited by Sally's cooking. William returned to the parlor and dropped into a chair and tried to review the situation. The vision of Bessie haunted him,—pitiful suffering Bessie,—all her lingering girlishness shrivelled because of him. It humiliated him to feel as though he had turned her defenceless from his door. Once he started to go to her. But why, since he had no comfort for her? Far better for her, then, that he should keep away. From the wreck of a relationship which never ought to have been, would it ever be possible to build a fine human friendliness? Fervently, humbly, he wished that it might be so. Wished that Bessie might come to know that all a man friend could



do for a woman, she might count upon from him. Until she could feel that he could never see her or think of her without sting of remorse.

Again he paced up and down. There was a singular expectancy upon him as though something might happen. It held him from bed. He could not bear the thought of his great four poster. He had spent so many gray dawn hours of late, looking up at its brocaded tester and planning, wishing, hoping, wondering how his future was to shape itself. Not long since he had believed that he had the problem of life solved as far as might be. Life was at best a makeshift business. A wise man wrung from it what peace, comfort, and content he might, knowing very well that he was not destined to be ever satisfied. So William had tried to keep his spirit unruffled, to take what cheer offered, to improve his collection. His collection! How suddenly that had grown inadequate. He no longer felt the slightest interest in the joys and woes of the shadowy company with which he had once been able fancifully to beguile his solitude. He craved the live, throbbing, human companionship which instinct told him a man should have.

Bessie had said that she could never go back to what she had been before. Of course she could not. Nor could he ever again satisfy his spirit with inanimate things. Never in all his somewhat unemotional life had he known consuming desire until now. He knew what was



the only thing that would satisfy, but he did not know whether he could attain it. The long night wore through. He dozed uneasily and woke to find himself sliding from the slippery haircloth of the long sofa. He had omitted his usual careful round of locking up, of making sure that the shutters were secure. The parlor shutters he had thrown open to make the room cheerful for Sally. The many windows of the ancient double room became long rectangles of pale luminosity. Gradually from the formless darkness shapes began to emerge, to grow clearer. Another day had come at last. Thank God. that night's over!



## CHAPTER XVI

### A BELATED CONFESSION

JUDGE BURRALL, almost oppressively comfortable in his quiet room, sat pondering over the affairs of William and Sally Van Besten. It was extraordinary how much of his time and attention the lonely old man bestowed upon that erratic young couple. Their live love story drew his kindly and observant interest so much more piquantly than the formal presentation of any printed page. Moreover, he loved to think that although neither of them knew it, he had himself contributed potently to bring about the happy issue that he thought he saw approaching.

"Now, if I'd encouraged that girl to rush to law as she was set upon doing, then the fat would have been in the fire. The great thing in adjusting difficulties is to persuade people to temporize." The Judge recalled the excited, tragic-eyed young woman who had invaded his sluggish peace a few months earlier, and rubbed his hands together complacently.

At times in his care-free retirement he felt very



lonely. To puzzle over what had caused the trouble, to dream of the two as inmeshed in happy romance, treading the illumined highway to the old, usual joys and tribulations, each with their own high values, had often assuaged the Judge's loneliness. But sometimes he found himself envious, not poignantly, but with an aching realization that after all he had missed some of the great and beautiful realities. The Judge sighed, and glanced about the quiet room uneasily in quest of something to dispel a sudden, disheartening sense of solitary age. With a sigh of relief he caught up his pipe and set about filling it. Thank God, a man had always his pipe, his soothing, unexacting pipe!

Before he could light his pipe he heard a quick step on the walk, on the porch, a quick pull at the bell. The Judge reconnoitered through the screen of lace curtain. "Bless me, there she is!" He hurried to the door, delightedly sure that as she had once sought him in her difficulties, she had now come to tell him that those difficulties were over. But the smile that Mrs. Van Besten forced in response to his welcoming was a woe-stricken smile. Unhappy perplexity looked out of her hazel eyes.

The shrewd eyes under Judge Burrall's thickets of grizzled eyebrows perceived her disquiet, her flutter of manner. "Glad to see you, Mrs. Van Besten. How are you to-day?"

Sally felt a quiet, kind sympathy in his manner.



He saw her lips quiver as she accepted the chair he drew forward. "Judge Burrall, I've come to you because I haven't anyone else to go to. I can't go on living this way. It's too intolerable. I want you to tell me what to do—how to set Mr. Van Besten free as soon as possible; how to be free myself."

The Judge looked very sober. "What has happened?"

"Oh, nothing. That is——" Her color flamed up. "I simply cannot bear to be in such an anomalous position any longer. It's too humiliating! To feel yourself a clog on a man. Neither more nor less!" Her voice shook. She stopped abruptly.

"I declare, I'm sorry to hear this. Extremely sorry. I had an idea that the differences between you and your husband were in the way of being adjusted." Genuine regret warmed the Judge's voice. He forgot to be urbane and frowned upon her. It was disconcerting to find his pleasant imaginings all in vain. "I suppose you and he have been tormenting each other after the usual fashion. You've quarreled."

"Oh, no."

"Then what is wrong?"

Sally was silent. So was the Judge for some minutes. Then he leaned forward. "My dear young lady, why won't you make a clean breast of it? It's the only way. How can you expect me to advise you, to help you without any real under-



standing of the situation? Come, be reasonable. I'd be glad to help you if it's possible. Now don't shilly-shally any longer, I beg of you. What was all this incomprehensible coil about in the first place? Tell me that."

Sally's color wavered. She started to speak, then caught her breath and deliberated. Her excited eyes seemed to be surveying the past. With a nervous start, she finally seized upon resolution. She threw back her shoulders. "Well, I will."

"Good."

"Oh, but it's so idiotic! I don't believe I can."

"Of course it is. Proceed, madam."

Sally laughed nervously. "People have always thought sure that it must have been something perfectly dreadful, but it wasn't. It really wasn't any one thing in particular, you see. It was the combination. At the time I really thought I was partly right, but afterwards I thought I'd been an awful fool."

The Judge nodded assent.

Sally deliberated and then embarked hesitatingly upon her story. "William hated the wedding fuss, the joking, and all that. He hated the rice throwing and the foolish white streamers and the old slippers. All those things made him feel ridiculous and he detested that. He tried to take everything in good part, but I saw how thoroughly he disliked it. Of course, those things are foolish, but then I thought he was foolish to take them so seriously."



"You thought that he ought to be too happy to mind." The Judge smiled. "And so he should have been."

"He wasn't. He said he failed to see how people could take pleasure in such idiocy. And I said: 'Oh, come William, don't be so severe. It may be silly but it's harmless. After all it means good-will.' But he wasn't a bit pleasant about it. He pulled out his knife and slashed away at those white streamers as though he'd have enjoyed slashing the people who had tied them on. It made me feel a little sober to have him like that."

"After awhile he pulled out a cigar and asked if I minded if he smoked." Sally's ancient indignation blazed up in her eyes as she looked at the Judge. "Think of it—— On our wedding journey! I said I did mind. I said I'd never thought it looked well for a man to smoke when he was out with a lady anyway." Her indignation strengthened. "Think of his wanting to smoke—then!"

The Judge shook his head gravely. "Very reprehensible certainly. Perhaps, too, you thought you ought to begin as you meant to keep on. To be sure, there's nothing like training a husband properly from the start."

The Judge's light irony was not ungenial. The deprecating curves of Sally's lips made admission.

"So you wouldn't let him smoke. How did he take that?"



“He said, ‘Oh, very well, if I objected——’ and he put the cigar back in his pocket. But he didn’t like it. I said I thought it was a great pity that tobacco had ever been discovered. It was a horrid, self-indulgent, bad-smelling habit. William said very drily that I quite shared his father’s views. He’d never been able to smoke except a few times on the sly until he went to college. If his father had caught him at it, he’d have thrashed him. And then I said that if thrashing would have cured him, it was a great pity his father hadn’t caught him. I said I knew he smoked altogether too much. It was very bad for his health. William said he didn’t agree with me at all. There were plenty of doctors who recommended their patients to smoke. Personally he thought that smoking had been beneficial to him. I said it was a very extravagant habit. William said he was sorry I felt that way, but he could afford to smoke. Oh, I never would have been so horrid if he’d laughed or something, been different, instead of sitting up there so tall and grim, and sort of sarcastic. Oh, I was horrid!” she cried out with emphatic conviction. “I didn’t really care a bit whether he smoked or not.”

“I see. Your prohibition was merely a means of discipline.”

“Finally William said that with all reasonable deference to my wishes, he didn’t propose to give up smoking. He whipped up the horse.



"Well, Judge Burrall, you see we weren't very romantic." Pain underlay her effort at lightness of manner.

"What happened next?"

"After awhile a big black and white cat ran across the road with a soft, little bird in its mouth. I exclaimed at the horrid, cruel beast. I said I'd always hated cats. They were cold-blooded, treacherous things. William said that he liked them. I said I never wanted any cats in my house. William said that he was sorry to hear me say that, for there were two cats there now that he was very fond of. They had been his companions in solitude for a long time. He said rather disagreeably that he hoped I wasn't going to be unkind to them. You see, that's the way we kept on aggravating each other. I'm sure I don't know why we did it."

She paused and averted her gaze and looked back mournfully over the dead years.

The Judge absent-mindedly fingered his pipe. Sally laughed. "Oh, you may smoke if you like, Judge Burrall. I don't really mind, you know. In fact, I rather like a man to smoke," she confessed.

"Thank you, my dear, but I don't believe I care to smoke at present. So you were a bit cantankerous about the cats. What happened next?"

"We drove on and on and we were so uncomfortable. That is, I was, and I guess William was, too. I couldn't help wondering if ever a girl



since the beginning of time had had such an uncomfortable, cheerless kind of wedding journey. I never thought William was very romantic, you know, and I wasn't either, but still——"

"I see. I understand your feelings perfectly. Naturally a little display of sentiment would have been appropriate to the occasion. But you mustn't forget that quite possibly your own attitude had been a little chilling, eh?"

"I know I was very disagreeable," she admitted, mournfully.

"Just so, my dear, and I expect you failed to realize that your husband had his points of sensitiveness as well as yourself. Perhaps he'd been expecting more of joy on that wedding drive as well as you. I really think you were a little hard on him, you know."

"At any rate it was dreadfully uncomfortable, and there didn't seem to be anything pleasant to say. Although William was right there beside me, he might just as well have been miles away. Do you know—I don't know how to explain—but it was sort of frightening. I felt as though I must just prod him to find out if he was there. I don't know what possessed me that day anyway!" She sighed. "I asked him if he cared a great deal about going to the Dutch Reformed Church. He said that he supposed I preferred the Presbyterian Church and he'd be glad to take a pew there for me if I would like it. He always had kept his father's old pew in the Dutch Church, but



that needn't make any difference. I told him he ought not to be indifferent about anything so important as our church home. I'd gone to the Presbyterian Church all my life, and of course I liked it better, but I was perfectly willing to go with him every other Sunday if he'd come with me every other Sunday. That would be fair to both of us."

"Didn't Van Besten think so?"

"He said I'd better go wherever I wanted to go and not count upon him. He'd fallen out of the church-going habit since he went as a youth under the compulsion of his elders. You don't know how irritating it was to have him sit up there as though he felt superior to going to church. As though church was just good for women." Again Sally's old indignation revived.

"Very irritating certainly."

"Of course I was foolish to make it an issue between us. Especially just then. Only—he was so aggravating. I wanted him to promise to come to church with me, but he wouldn't. You know it really did seem right to insist upon your husband's going to church. And I thought it would look so queer for me to be going without him." Sally spoke in self-justification, but her eyes suddenly swam in tears. Her throat grew convulsed. She covered her face with both hands.

The Judge waited patiently, watching her from under those shaggy eyebrows of his with a kindly and sympathetic comprehension.



Presently Sally sat up with sprightly determination. She shook out her damp little handkerchief and steadied her voice. "I said that if he didn't care enough for me to sacrifice himself to the extent of going to church with me like respectable people, then our getting married had been an awful mistake. Oh, I ought never to have said that! But what if I was unreasonable? Wasn't he unreasonable, I'd like to know, sitting there like an icicle, getting chillier and chillier? Any girl expects something different on her wedding day."

Sally paused long enough to fold her handkerchief into a tiny square with elaborate care. The Judge refrained from hurrying her in any way. He perceived how hard she was trying to control the trembling of her lips. She glanced at him again and hurried on. "He muttered that perhaps it had been a mistake, but we'd have to make the best of it now. He was dreadfully angry in that horrid still way of his, or he never would have said it. But it hurt me. It cut me like a knife to have him take me up like that. I know I'm quick-tempered. I behaved childishly, but I never stopped to think. I said, no, it wasn't too late, either, if that was the way he felt. I told him to let me out, and I would go back home. He needn't think he had to live with me."

The Judge watched curiously her fresh color ebb away with intensity of feeling.

"That did wake him up. He was shocked.



He did try to be nice then. He said he never meant it. He said: 'What in the world has come over us both. We've never acted like this before?' He did try to—to—be nice——" faltered Sally. "But I pulled away from him. I told him I didn't want him to touch me. He even said he'd go to church with me if that would make me any happier. He begged me to be reasonable, and I said I was reasonable. But I wasn't. If he hadn't been so awfully reasonable," Sally appealed to the Judge, "I'm sure I never would have acted so. But I burst out crying and that made me horribly ashamed, and I really was just about tired out, you know. Everything seemed so horrid—so disappointing! I just refused to listen to anything he said. I told him I knew he was sorry he'd married me and I wanted to go home. I told him he'd got to let me out or I'd jump out. I was going straight home. But I never thought he'd let me do it."

"That's where he made his mistake." The Judge nodded conviction. "He ought to have held on to you with one hand if necessary, while he drove with the other. That's what he should have done."

"He didn't. He just argued and argued, but I wouldn't listen. I was beside myself. I just wanted to scream, and I felt as though I must do something. At last he stopped the horse. He turned quite white. He said very sternly: 'Very well. Have your own way if you must. I don't



pretend to understand why you do this. If you really want to go home, I suppose you must do so. But if you persist in outraging me in this way, don't expect me to come suing later on. I stand ready to fulfill my part of the contract whenever you say so, but you'll have to let me know when you're ready to fulfill your part.'

"You see, he'd stopped the horse. I don't know what possessed me, unless it was sheer obstinacy, but I climbed out of the buggy without answering him and walked off without once looking back. Even then I didn't think he'd really let me do it. Once I thought he was coming after me, but it was somebody else. Every step I took I felt more terrified to realize what I'd done. I thought that William would surely come or write or give me some kind of a chance, make it a little easy for me, but he never did. William is the stubbornest man. That's his Dutch ancestry, I suppose. And every single day made it more impossible for me to do anything. I really couldn't, you know." Sally stopped with a long breath.

"And that's all?"

"That's all." Sally gave another sigh of relief at having finished her confession. "That's just exactly what happened, and you are the only person in the world I've ever breathed it to."

It lightened Sally's tragic mood to feel the Judge's regard rest on her as kindly as ever. He did not look as though he thought her a



hopeless virago, as she had half anticipated.

"But what I want to know now is, what new complication has arisen? You and your husband were thrown together again by a fortunate chance, you did succeed in getting on friendly terms once more, everything looked toward an ultimate happy outcome such as all your friends must desire for you both. Then all of a sudden, here you are again, as unhappy as ever, demanding separation. Now what's the reason of this?"

Again she seemed to hear that sobbing voice in William's hall. Mentally, she saw again the gay and charming face which she had once watched enviously while William looked into it with fascinated absorption. "I think perhaps Mr. Van Besten has become interested in someone else." She spoke hesitatingly. Then, "Oh, I don't blame him at all. It's perfectly natural."

"And in wrath, just because you really do care for him—yes, you do—you would hasten to immolate yourself. Now, my dear girl, will you listen to reason? Don't you see that you've come to the place in your life where you can't afford to rush off into temper or heroics? You can't afford to do it, you know." The big masculine voice dominated her effort to interrupt. She listened docilely. "As you say, it's natural that your husband should be attracted by some other woman. The thing was bound to happen sooner or later. He is a man, you know. Not a wooden effigy, though he's stiff enough sometimes, that



young man, God knows! But you women are so exacting, the best of you. You demand the impossible. I don't know what diversions this husband of yours may have sought in his loneliness. I know this: He's been falling in love with you all over again this long time. Bless me, do you think I've no eyes in my old head?"

Sally listened intently. Her drooping visage brightened.

"Don't wade off into a slough of impossible sentiment." In his earnestness, the Judge forgot his habitual gallantry. "This man is your husband by the law of the land. He'll care for you if you'll let him. Don't ride off on any more tangents. You think he cares for some other woman, do you? Well, who is it? What makes you think so?"

Sally reminded him of the current rumors. She informed him sketchily that she had seen Mr. Van Besten with a lady. She could not bring herself to recount the arrival of William's unhappy visitor, the accusing wail that still rang in her ears. It felt disloyal both to William and to his unhappy friend to tell. Proudly she said that she had no accusations to bring—only— A sudden haughtiness stiffened her figure. Again reserve enveloped her.

"A divorce is not to be obtained merely for the asking," the Judge reminded. "You will have to show cause why your marriage should be annulled."



Sally clutched the arms of her chair defiantly. "The law hasn't any right to hold people together under such circumstances. It's preposterous. Judge Burrall, you must find some way of setting us free."

"Well, we'll see. We'll see."

"Oh, someone's coming!" She started up in alarm. "I must go. I'll come again."

"He can wait in the other room," the Judge said soothingly.

She lingered. "I'm glad I told you anyway. I'm glad you know all about it. It's a relief to have told at last."

The Judge took her hand very kindly and patted her on the shoulder. "You must have patience a little longer. Will you promise to be guided by me?"

"But it's been so long already." Her voice shook. A flood of emotion swept over her. Her lips quivered piteously. Her eyes filled. She turned blindly toward the door, seeking escape from self-betrayal. Judge Burrall laid his arm around her and drew her head gently to his broad shoulder. "There, there," he whispered soothingly. "You're young. You've no reason to despair. Your affairs are all going to come right. I'm sure of it." His big voice throbbed with kindness.

"But it's been so long," sobbed Sally. "I never meant it. I've been so lonely all this time! Nobody knows. I've been so lonely!"



The Judge felt more than half inclined to kiss the flushed, pathetic young woman resting so trustfully against his broad breast. He refrained and contented himself with another fatherly pat. "There, there, my dear girl. Cheer up. It's going to be all right, I tell you."

Sally looked up into his concerned face. "I oughtn't to keep you from that man any longer." Her eyes, still suffused, softened gratefully. "Anyway, I'm glad you know the worst about me. You don't utterly despise me, do you?"

The Judge's short laugh was very reassuring. Sallie hurried away.



## CHAPTER XVII

### THE DEEP HOLE

IT was the next morning.

"Sally, William's here," called Annie from the foot of the stairs. Sally's heart jumped as she rose at the summons. "He is anxious. He does care, to come again so soon!"

"Very well, Annie. I'll be down in a few moments," she called back in a studiedly composed voice.

William came forward eagerly, his face intent and questioning. She gave him sober greeting and drew her hand quietly away from his. It was a singularly unresponsive little hand that morning. "Won't you sit down?" Her unimpeachable courtesy served as a means of withdrawal from the familiarity that had been so pleasantly strengthening between them. It seemed to him that she had placed herself alertly on the defensive against his nearer approach. William set his lips in resolution to demolish those defences presently.

"Why did you run away from me yesterday?"



She would not look at him. He saw her color flame up. "You seemed to be engaged. You had rather a dull day for your drive." Her very tone had changed, was formal.

Of late, whenever they had been together, heart cheer had bubbled from their lips in light mockery, light laughter. The veriest trivialities of the moment had gained significance. There had been endless things to say. Each had felt like a fascinated explorer of the other's territory, a more and more bold explorer, yet cautious to inflict no harm, bruise no sensibilities as he, as she, reconnoitered. Their intercourse had become easy and natural, and they had sought it with the zest they might have brought to a delightful game. But now, although she had offered him her hand and was trying to appear the same, he felt instantly the change that had come over her. The constraint on her brow, the forced smile on her lips, seemed to be holding judgment in abeyance. Her eyes refused to meet frankly his questioning gaze.

He felt a subtle, silent challenge. He crossed the room to her. "Tell me, Sally, why did you go off in that sudden way?" His earnest tone forced a way through the pretence of ease. It was pleading, passionate.

Sally did not answer. She uneasily evaded his look.

The four walls of the orderly parlor oppressed William like prison walls. Everything surrounding



him seemed in its trim home aspect to be out of sympathy with all that he felt to be stirring within him, all that he had come to say. At any moment little Joe, happily confident that he could never be unwelcome, might push open the door. Annie Haselton, kind and considerate, would keep away. Yet all the time they would know that she too was near, just across the hall in the sitting-room. William felt a great desire to get Sally away from her habitual setting, out somewhere where he could have her all to himself, in the open. He felt that what he had come to say could be easier said under the sober autumnal sky across which gray clouds scurried continually before conflicting winds. The serenity of the home-like room was oppressive to him. He stood looking down upon her with great seriousness. "Sally, there's something I want to say to you. Will you come out with me? Some quiet spot out of doors? Anywhere but in the house." He saw her waver. Denial seemed hovering on her lips. "Please do. It's important. Don't refuse this little favor." His voice vibrated insistently.

Sally rose. "I must get my jacket then."

Little Joe saw them starting, and precipitated himself after them. "Let me go too! Wait, Aunt Sally, I want to go too." His mother hastily closed the door upon his outcry. He struggled in vain in her restraining clutch. "Keep still, Joe. You can't go. No, you can't. If you're a good boy and don't cry you shall go



with mother presently." From the window Mrs. Haselton regarded the two tall figures going soberly side by side along the lane that led up toward the woods. She nodded satisfaction to herself. "I guess they've made it up, whatever it was. Foolish things!"

In other years William and Sally had taken country walks together, but neither remembered those now. Sally took the lead and he followed, careless whither she conducted. William made no effort at conversation as they went along. Once Sally called his attention to a plump gray squirrel holding a green wild grape between his sharp front teeth. The squirrel sat on its haunches and watched them with bright little eyes, alert to fly if they showed signs of malice. As they did not, he went about his harvesting before they were fairly past. Sally abandoned her effort at indifferent chat before her companion's steady lack of response. The matter between them hung in suspense as they went silently.

The lane grew grassier. On either side was a tall fringe of goldenrod and asters, the glory of their gold and purple faded, in sober russet now, their tiny seeds ripe to sail off on downy pinions. The lane was a wood road now, leading across the little farms that lie around Manorton. The brook followed and left and came back to it again and again. Through the flat meadows the brook was silent, but in other places they heard its cheerful croon as it splashed over a stony bed.



Presently they entered a little glen and here the brook broadened into a dark, quiet pool. Its banks were steep. Great willows shaded it. One willow, torn up by the roots in some fierce storm, lay on the ground. Gleams of pale gold came from the willow stems. The flat stones lying about were tapestried with silver lichens. A more sequestered spot could scarcely be found, out of sight, out of hearing of any but the little, uninterfering wild folks of the fields. Once before they had been here together, but that fact was far from their consciousness. The quivering pain in their hearts to-day drove remembrance away. They had never felt anything like it in those other days, when they had been so carelessly at ease, so carelessly sure that they understood life and understood each other.

Sally stopped uncertainly and glanced toward William almost timidly. William stopped. "Yes, this will do." He looked down into the murky pool. Sally waited. There was a long silence. They were so quiet that a fat green bullfrog hopped almost at their feet without discovering them, then, as William moved, splashed into the pool with a protesting croak. An inquisitive catbird came to investigate them. Sally saw him in his trim Quaker dress in an alder thicket, flitting his impudent tail, evidently asking himself what these intrusive strangers wanted here.

"Joe and I used to come here when we were children," Sally said presently. "The place



always had a kind of charm for us, it was so shut away and mysterious. Somebody told us once that this was a bottomless pool. We really believed that if we tumbled in we'd fall through and through until we came out in China or somewhere else on the other side of the world. After that we were afraid of it, but still we loved to come."

William regarded her with a troubled smile.

"But one day when the grass was slippery, I did tumble in, and Joe, the dear fellow, came splashing right in after me. He wasn't going to let me drown alone. But what do you think? The Deep Hole wasn't deep at all. The water came scarcely to our knees. It's the high banks and being so shaded that makes it look as though it might be deep. Such a disillusion!" Sally tried to speak lightly.

"Sally," William spoke in a low voice and regarded her intently. "Tell me what you thought. Why did you rush away like that?"

She did not answer. He saw a crimson wave rising over her averted face. "Tell me what you thought, dear?" He spoke the last word softly, lingeringly, as though he loved to say it. As she heard it an odd expression flitted across Sally's lips, but still she did not look at him. He could endure her noncommittal attitude no longer. "Won't you look at me? Please look at me."

She had never before heard that passionate



pleading in his voice. Never. She felt it stirring her spirit. "What did you think? Please tell me." His persistence, very gentle, was yet inexorable. She felt it such. She did not know how to evade or to deny it. Her lips trembled.

"What did you think?"

He would keep on asking until she answered. Sally knew it.

"I thought perhaps the things I'd heard were true." She spoke in a subdued voice as simply as a child.

"Yes?" William's tone grew businesslike. "What had you heard?"

If he would have it then. Sally glanced up at him courageously. "I heard you'd given food for scandal. That you were very intimate with a young widow up in Kirton. That you and she had been seen in compromising situations. People joked and said you weren't all you seemed. Those things in the paper every week, you know."

Yes, William knew. He had writhed under the coarse malicious pleasantry. The editor of the *Kirton Republican* had a standing grudge against William Van Besten, as formerly against his father, as a prosperous and influential Democrat. This feeling had been intensified of late by personal friction in connection with civic affairs. The editor had not been above slinging poisoned arrows at the young merchant from his weekly editorial sheet.



Again the two were silent. Then Sally went on: "I said it wasn't true. I didn't believe a word of it. I knew you would never do anything dishonorable. I said to myself that you had a right to have your own friends. You and some woman had been seen together a few times, and so horrid, disgusting gossip had been invented. I told Mrs. Lanson so and Millie."

He wondered why she paused so abruptly. Almost Sally had plunged into telling him how she had gone to consult Judge Burrall about setting him free. But although that was not so very long ago, it lay so far back now under intervening things that instinctively she avoided it. "Only I did think that perhaps you were getting interested in some one. That didn't seem strange. But I was sure you wouldn't do anything wrong."

"That's where you were mistaken, you see." There was pain in William's quick speech. When he spoke again he surprised her. "Do you know what I've been finding out all this time you've been away? I've found out how hard it is to get along without you, how much I love you. Sally, come to me."

But Sally shook her head. She rebuffed his entreating hand.

"That other woman, William. You haven't told me who she was. You haven't told me what she wanted; why she was so unhappy."

She saw William's face grow rigid as he faced her squarely. "No, but that's what I brought



you out here to tell you. I came down to-day on purpose to tell you. Sally, I want you to know the very worst there is to know about me."

"Well, who is she?" Sally's voice was hard.

"She's the woman I went to when I was desolate and in need of any comfort I could find. The woman who did what she could for me and was kind and patient and generous to me always. The woman I deceived into thinking that I cared for her. Perhaps I deceived myself into thinking the same thing, but that was only for a very little while. Not that I ever lied to her. There are more ways than one of deceiving. She's the woman I've basely misused. There's the truth for you." He flung the words at her defiantly.

They looked at each other challengingly.

"Why should you come to me if she's been all that to you? Why don't you go to her?" A note of jealous pain made Sally's voice uncertain.

"That's over. It was a mistake from first to last," he told her sombrely.

The pause grew too tense. Sally broke it. "You've spoiled everything," she said almost childishly.

"Sally, forgive me. Come to me."

She was agitated as she plucked at the willow leaflets. "Do you suppose I ever could now after what's happened?"

"Why not? Since I tell you that's over and done with?"

"Why not?" She flung the question back at



him indignantly. "Because I'm not the kind of woman who can be happy at another woman's expense. The thought that I had taken you away from her would always haunt me. I'd feel like a thief," she declared energetically.

"Sally," William said harshly, "you mustn't think I'm at your disposal like that. I'm not, you know. I shall never go back to her. Must I tell you again that's done?"

His vehemence startled her, stung her to a sense of powerlessness to control the situation.

"What is the use of discussing this matter any longer, since we never can agree? I think we'd better go back to the house now," she said, with an effort at jaunty independence.

"Not yet," William said masterfully. "Sit down and listen to me."

With a wavering glance at his set face, Sally submissively perched herself upon a bough of the prostrate elm. William threw himself upon the mossy bole beside her. "Can a man do more than make open admission of his wrongdoing?" he demanded. "Would you have respected me more if I'd tried to keep this knowledge from you?"

"No, of course not." Sally struggled for composure, hating herself because she felt tears so near. "But the admission doesn't atone, doesn't make wrong right, does it? I can't possibly feel toward you just as I did before I knew."



"That's true enough," he granted. "But it does establish a basis of sincerity. That's what I want between you and me. You would send me back to her, would you? Bid me try to maintain a lie with her. Upon my word, I'm not sure but that my morality, such as it is, is of more washable quality than yours." Then with a sudden transition that shook her composure, he bent over her. "Sally, do you remember the linen lawn? Did you think me a mean-spirited curmudgeonly fellow that day? Well, all the time I was longing to kiss you."

She flushed. "Even if I did care for you, it wouldn't be right, abstractly right now, for me to be your wife. You've made that impossible, you see," she said unsteadily.

"Why that?"

"Because I never will condone such things. You haven't any right to desert her and make her unhappy. You ought to go to her and be loyal to all you've led her to believe."

Something like anger sparkled in William's gray eyes. "Do you know what you're doing? Dressing up a dummy in your own nice feminine theories of life. Then you declare that's what a man ought to be. What do you know about it? Never mind the other woman. It was only fair that you should know about her, but she has nothing to do with the issue between you and me. The point is, do you care for me? I want you. I ask you to join your life to mine. Sally, I——



I love you. It's been growing in me ever since that day we met at the vendue. Hasn't the same thing been growing in you, too? Think what good times we've had. You have liked to have me around, haven't you? You made me welcome. Oh, Sally, don't be stubborn! Don't be unreasonable."

His pleading was hard to withstand. She struggled to do so. "No, no, I cannot do it. It doesn't seem right to me."

"My darling, don't you know that there always is, there always must be, something for one of the two to put up with, to deal with charitably?" There was deep pain and yearning in his voice. The old calm, self-satisfied William Van Besten was gone forever, was utterly dead. This man showed that he had drunk the bitter draught of self-knowledge.

"Dear girl, dear girl!" He spoke the words yearningly. "Are you clinging to the sweet old dreams still? Wake up, Sally. The world isn't what we used to think it was. It's not for our adjusting. But we can do our little part toward making it a good place."

"Standards have to be maintained." Sobs struggled in her throat. She turned her head and bit a pale gold stem of a willow leaflet and held her composure.

"Schoolmistress! Yes. But it isn't maintaining a standard to repudiate a sinner. You should help him to do better. You can, dear, if you will."



"You ask too much." She was pale now with agitation. She tried futilely to draw her hands away from his masterful, gentle hold. "I wouldn't repudiate you. I wouldn't judge. As you say, I know nothing of a man's life. But I—I can never marry you now. It wouldn't be right."

Her decision challenged him. He read sorrow in her eyes. He sought and sought there for something else and was not sure whether or not he found it. "Dear, you are wrong. Isn't life complicated enough that you should deliberately make it more so? Don't let us argue, theorize, as though life dwelt in abstractions. The time is so short. The years slip away so fast. We aren't children any longer. How old are you, dear? Twenty-eight. I'm thirty-four years old. Before I know it, I'll be forty—middle-aged. Let's live and love and bear joys and sorrows together as they come along. All possible help a man and woman can give each other we ought to give. Don't let's forbid ourselves the good things we may have because they do not satisfy us as ideal. I am faulty. You will have to be patient, to excuse often, but if you love me, you will be willing to do that. That's a big part of loving—the biggest part, perhaps. Those whom we give most to are the ones we love the best. Oh, Sally, be generous!"

She looked white and shaken as she drew away from him. "I can't. I won't. I won't let you persuade me to do what I believe to be



wrong, what I've despised and condemned other people for doing ever since I knew anything at all about life."

"Never mind that. Tell me one thing. Do you want to come to me? Sally, do you want to come?"

She could not support his burning glance. His face looked wan with ardor. She felt singularly thrilled under a compulsion which she could not analyze, did not understand.

"Do you, Sally?"

"How can I tell how I would feel if you hadn't done this thing? But you have done it, William, and it alters everything."

William squared his shoulders. The determined manliness of the gesture was pleasing to her. "Listen to me, Sally. Don't you know yet that it is impossible for a man to get away from his wrongdoings, his mistakes? They haunt him always. The consequences persist. The remembrance brings shame. There's always punishment enough, God knows. Then why should you take it upon yourself to punish me?"

"I do not," she protested quickly.

William caught up her hand and held it so tightly that his clasp hurt. "Then just forgive and come and help me to make good," he whispered.

The long silence grew trying. To end it, Sally spoke. "Oh, I can't bear to talk about it any longer. I'm going home." She had recovered composure. She looked exasperatingly trim and



unruffled as she sat on the willow bough. In her renunciation of William's proposal, she felt herself rather finely living up to her own ideal of how a woman should face such a situation, should prompt a man to a higher ideal. She felt deeply excited, not altogether unhappy. The high romanticism of her own attitude was gratifying and impressive to her.

"First tell me this," William demanded. "Do you want to throw me off altogether? Obliterate me from your life? Is that what you meant to convey when you ran away?"

She was conscious of disconcerting chill at the suggestion. Over her surged realization of how much she would miss him if she tried to obliterate him as he said. Most assuredly she did not want to let him go so utterly as that. Nor did anything of the kind seem necessary.

"No, certainly not, William. I didn't mean anything of that kind. Not if you'll be reasonable, that is."

She thought that he looked anything but reasonably inclined. "Why can't we keep on just as we have been doing these last weeks? I don't mind telling you that I value your friendship, William. I've enjoyed your visits."

"Friendship isn't what will satisfy me. I ask more of you than that." The stern demand of his tone gave her a shock. Then her spirit rose in resistance.

"I'm sorry to hear you say that, William, for



it's all I can possibly give you." She spoke coolly, pleased to feel herself once more mistress of the situation.

"Come, let's go. Really, I must be getting home."

He laid his hand on her arm and looked deeply into her eyes. "This isn't the end. Don't imagine that it is."

They went silently down the lane homeward.



## CHAPTER XVIII

### LITTLE JOE HELPS THE SITUATION

A MELLOW blaze burned steadily in the sitting-room hearth. Little Joe lay before it on the rug, happily building block houses. His mother sat sewing by the table. Sally and William came soberly into the peaceful home atmosphere.

Annie looked up brightly. "I began to think you were lost," she greeted them. "Get your blocks out of the way, Joe, and let Aunt Sally and Mr. Van Besten sit near the fire." She slyly gave each a look of scrutiny. Their behavior of late had puzzled her extremely. She very much wanted to know if they had reached an understanding, but their faces told her nothing. William, always exasperatingly noncommittal, had a curious sparkle in his eyes. Annie felt intuitively that something of the load obviously oppressing him when he came had dropped away. Not all. She thought that Sally appeared oddly subdued, her cheeks flushed with more than their natural healthful bloom, her manner betraying an inward restlessness.



"William, now Sally's home you've no excuse for rushing straight away as you did last time. Stay and take supper with us, won't you?"

The Haselton house no longer felt like a prison to him. Mrs. Haselton's easy hospitality was grateful to him. "You're very good, Annie. I'd like to stay, but perhaps Sally's had about all she can stand of me for one time?" He looked at Sally straightforwardly, hailing her to endorse the invitation or to convey that she would rather have him go away.

Sally roused herself. "Stay, of course, William. I'll be glad to have you." She meant it. From that interview at the Deep Hole she had brought back an uneasy desire to recover something that in his presence she had lost. Her light and easy independence had been dear to her. It bruised her self-esteem, this singular consciousness that somehow, when they were together, William sought to dominate—did sometimes.

Joseph came home from the mill. "Well, now it's good to see you, William." He shook hands heartily. "Hello, kid, what are you about down there?" He sniffed kitchenward. "Something smells mighty good. What are you going to give us for supper, old lady? My, but it's good to get home after a day's work!" His coming enlivened the others—introduced a heartier note of cheer. His wife beamed with satisfaction at his promise of appetite. His boy babbled tirelessly at his knee, careless whether he was heeded



or not. A sense of contrast between this home and his own, of the loneliness of his lot, smote William. He looked at Sally and found her regarding him with a kind of baffled inquiry.

As penniless children feel wistfully the allurements of Christmas shop windows, gaze at treasures not for them, the two took note of the family joy.

Up in Kirton, William Van Besten prepared his breakfast expeditiously and ate it expeditiously. He felt no desire to linger at home. An energy that would permit no idling possessed him. Time was when he had been scrupulously attentive to his housekeeping. He had prided himself upon applying to its homely detail the principles which made him successful. But he had been seized by a great distaste for this woman's business. He decided to stop on his way into Kirton and engage his charwoman to come every day and put things to rights. It was ridiculous for a man of affairs like himself to be giving his attention to washing dishes.

Nor was he inclined to give much attention to his collection. Catalogues of antiques, sales announcements, no longer held him. They accumulated in a dusty heap on the sitting-room lounge. He no longer held gently melancholy communion with that shadowy band, the dead owners of the old tables and chairs, but was quite willing that they should rest peacefully in their graves.

William Van Besten felt life quicken in his veins.



He looked back now with slightly contemptuous wonder upon the man he long had been. The inert fellow had pursued the daily grind spiritlessly, like a horse in the treadmill. William knew now that whatever else life was meant to be, it was not meant to be meaningless. It surely was no man's part to endure supinely. It was his prerogative to demand and to grasp the rich pleasures of life. In future that was what he would do. People who knew him, encountering him, regarded him with some curiosity. A novel alertness had changed his general bearing, quickened his step. Every clerk in his employ felt him more human, more approachable, than he had been.

Wherever he went, whatever he did, he carried the thought of Sally with him. He condemned her attitude toward him as wrong, fanatical. What a bright, happy face she had when disagreeable thoughts did not oppress her. What laughing gleams came and went in her clear eyes. How quickly her healthful color deepened in response to inner emotion.

In the evening, when he sat surrounded by his collection, he invoked Sally to visit him. His book, his paper, lay forgotten. His spirit attended her as she went about the rooms enlivening its dull quiet with her merry comment. No one else's laugh came with such a gush of genuine heart cheer. Often he mentally paid tribute to her plucky independence. Not many girls situ-



ated like Sally would have had force and courage to win so definite and honorable a position.

But he wished she had not. Sally was too independent. Her easy, unquestioning self-reliance challenged a man. Now if she were more like her sister-in-law, like Annie, with her truly feminine way of turning to Joseph Haselton in all her daily dilemmas, sure that he could and would solve all her perplexities. William liked Joe Haselton, but thought him a sufficiently commonplace fellow. Obviously, he was not commonplace to Annie. It was amusing to hear Annie quote Joseph—"Joe says"—as ultimate authority. It was amusing, and yet after all William believed that the proper attitude for a woman. Still, William did not wish Sally different from what she was. He had come to perceive that even her faults, her foibles, were dear to him. He had never thought her an exquisite piece of perfection. She was satisfyingly human, every bit of her. Sometimes in those day-dreams of his, walking up and down in a blue veil of cigar smoke, he perceived himself and her quarrelling. But the quarrelling only added zest to underlying joy of companionship. Three long days since he had seen her. He would drive down to-morrow. How would it be to send her a line that she might expect him? Then she could arrange to have the coast clear of customers, the tiresome, always interrupting customers.

As she sat sewing, Sally glanced out less often



at the village street, which for so long had entertained her with its mild drama of life. A more vital drama unfolding within herself rivetted her attention. She tried in vain not to think of it. Over and over again she reviewed her interview with William at the Deep Hole, every time felt more dissatisfied, for it seemed to her that she had not properly upheld her own dignity, or the dignity of the unhappy young widow up in Kirton. She had purposed a renunciation which she had felt as highly unselfish and noble. William had treated her purposed course with something resembling contempt.

“Never mind her, the issue now is between you and me.” That is what he had said.

But he must be shown the loyalty of one woman to another. He must also be taught that although Sarah Van Besten valued his companionship, she had a will and a mind of her own equal to his.

Their companionship was so pleasant that each time he came she hesitated to spoil it for the moment by reminding him of its limitations. But when he was away from her, she sometimes felt strong impatience of a claim which she could not help feeling was gradually strengthening. William was a friend, a valued friend to be sure, but since he could never be anything more, it was weak and unworthy to allow herself to depend upon his visits. Then she wondered when he would come again, so that she could begin the demonstration.

Millie, Mrs. Morris Stetson now, and the living



picture of a happy bride, ran up the Haselton steps and opened the door. She and Morris had driven up to Kirton that day and were just returned. She was still her friend Sally's next door neighbor, for Morris had gone to live at the Thompson's upon his marriage. The shabby house had been put to rights, painted. It looked quite a different place.

"Where are you, Sally?" Millie called, as she hurried on into the sitting-room. "I've something for you." She waved a note. "Mr. Van Besten asked me if I would be so kind as to hand you this. I was in the store you know. We had quite a chat together. Sally, I never knew before that Mr. Van Besten could be so pleasant. I've always thought he was rather stiff. But he wasn't to-day."

Sally took the note, and held it unopened. "Did you and Morris have a successful day? Did you find what you wanted?"

"Almost everything. Sally, we had lots of fun. You've no idea what a capable shopper Morris is. Why, it was a revelation to me to see him shop."

Sally regarded her admiringly. Shabby Millie Thompson existed no longer. "Millie, matrimony is certainly becoming to you. I never saw you look better." Tenderly Sally took the girl by the shoulders and looked wistfully into her face. "You're every bit as happy as you expected to be, aren't you?"



"Happier," Millie answered proudly, with a proud look. The color rose in her cheeks at a word these days. Her girlish prettiness was fast maturing to more significant beauty. She bore herself with new dignity. Her former flutter of uncertainty was gone.

"Why, when I think I might not have known Morris, he might not have cared for me——" tears actually came to her eyes. She laughed as she winked them away. "I guess you think I'm an awful silly about Morris. But nobody knows what he really is but me."

A hungry look, of which she was unconscious, peeped out of the clear eyes of the older girl woman.

"Say, Sally, what are you going to wear to the Wynnes, Monday night?" Millie, who had gone shabby all her days, frankly delighted in her pretty new clothes.

"I don't know. I haven't given it a thought," Sally answered. "What are you going to wear?" She spoke absent-mindedly, her mind on the letter in her hand.

Millie looked intensely considering. "My red dress, I guess, the one with the ecru lace." She brightened. "Morris just loves that gown. He says I'm a stunner when I've got that on. Isn't it awfully vain of me to repeat that? Well, he'll be expecting me. I told him I'd come right back. I only ran over to give you the note."

When Millie had gone, Sally opened her note. She looked puzzled, half-amused, half-irritated at



what she read. "Listen, Annie. Isn't this provoking? William's sent me word that he means to drive down to-morrow."

Sally and Annie and little Joe had planned to pass the next day with friends living a few miles from Manorton. Mr. Haselton was to join them in time for supper and bring his family home in the evening. When she had agreed to the arrangement Sally had been disconcerted to feel reluctance to it because, possibly, just possibly, William might elect that day to drive down. What was she coming to, that such a chance should influence her, she queried of herself indignantly and promptly accepted the invitation.

It was something new for William to notify her of his coming. Well, he couldn't expect her to topsy-turvey all her arrangements, even if he had.

"Oh," Mrs. Haselton exclaimed regretfully. "Isn't that unfortunate?" She held her needlework suspended. "See here, Sally, if you'd like to stay home, I can easily tell the Stimpsons that you found you couldn't come. Your work is always a good and sufficient excuse, you know. It's too bad to let William drive all the way down for nothing, and you can't possibly send him word."

"No," Sally considered. Annie divined that she wanted to agree to the proposition. Then Sally shook her head. "What a way to treat people!" It was particularly unfortunate. She had not seen William since their interview at the



Deep Hole. A few days after that he had come but upon that occasion she had been out driving with Ed Allen.

"No, no, of course I can't do that." She spoke petulantly. "I'm sorry things conflict, but I can't help it. Think how long I've been promising the Stimpsons."

"But it is hard on William."

"I can't help that. An engagement is an engagement," Sally said in a positive way.

"What ails Sally?" Joseph Haselton inquired of his wife as he encountered her in the hall. "Something seems to have put her out of sorts."

"Foolish girl," Annie answered, in a low confidential tone, and told him of William's note. "She's just crazy to stay at home for him, but she won't let herself do it. She might just as well as not. I'd make it all right with the Stimpsons."

"That pair are beyond me," Joseph commented. "Let them paddle their own canoe, they're bound to do it anyway."

The house was bolted and barred. The Haselton family left it early in the morning. They found no indication of William's visit on their return. Sally looked about eagerly, vainly, for some scrap of a note. She felt compunction in spite of herself. Had he been angry? Much disappointed? Next time he came this disappointment should be made up to him. In her mind she promised him that even with eagerness.

To-morrow morning he would receive the note



she had mailed before she went visiting. That would instruct him in two matters, that she could not allow him to make her deviate from obligations to other people, and that she nevertheless felt kind and friendly toward him.

This was Tuesday. Perhaps he would drive down on Thursday. Certainly he would be down again before the end of the week. She felt a pleasant thrill of exultation in the consciousness that she was a magnet strong to draw him before many days. She was distinctly surprised when Thursday passed—and Friday, without a sign of him. The week ran out, and half another, and still William did not come. Sally missed him.

“Tell me a story, Aunt Sally. You haven’t told me a story for a long time, and you haven’t put me to bed, and you haven’t took me out walking nor nothing,” little Joe complained.

Sally took his plump little body into her arms with some compunction. The arraignment was just. In her preoccupation she had neglected little Joe of late. But she loved him; loved the feel of his heavy little head nestled in her neck. She kissed his short tumbled curls, kissed down the white lids over the accusing eyes. “I know I haven’t, darling. Aunt Sally’s been so busy.” She propped him up on her lap with a firm clasp on each shoulder. “Do you want to go up to Kirton with me to-morrow? We’ll drive up with Mr. Herter in the big mail wagon and then we’ll go in the shops and see all the beautiful things.



Won't that be fine?" Little Joe wriggled with delight. He had never been to Kirton, never been beyond a few miles from Manorton in his short life. He drew a long breath of satisfaction. On the way up, his Aunt Sally devoted herself to his entertainment with something of an effort. Little Joe was a darling and she must always love him, but after all he belonged to Annie and Joe. She had no real rights in him. She felt desolately that she had no one really of her own. Of late she had felt constantly restless and dissatisfied.

Energetic Sally pulled her spirit out of retrospection. This was little Joe's day and she meant to make it a glorious one. They went to the toy shop first of all, and expended the accumulation of Joe's bank kept on the sitting-room mantel at home. All the family had taken a hand at breakfast time in shaking the pennies out of the white china hen. Mr. Haselton had added a quarter to his son's store and Aunt Sally had added another quarter. Little Joe felt his resources boundless. It was a surprise, a blow, to hand it all over to the tall and smiling toyshop man in exchange for the horse and wagon which he demanded as soon as he spied it on the counter.

The wonders of Kirton were revealed to his staring, happy eyes as he and Aunt Sally went about their errands. While she tried hard to think of nothing but making him happy, she could not help wondering if she would see William



to-day. She had sent him a note explanatory of her absence, of the locked house he had found. Why couldn't he have demonstrated that he took the sensible view of the matter by coming down again in a day or two? Uneasiness lingered with her because he had not done so. Little Joe looked up discontentedly into her thoughtful face. "You've forgot me, Aunt Sally. You've forgot 'bout me." He tugged at her hand.

"Oh, no, I haven't. We're going in here now to buy Aunt Sally's things." She led him into Van Besten's. "Look around, dearie, and see if you can find anything that mother would like us to bring home." William was not in sight. Should she ask to see him just to add a pleasant explanatory word to her note? But would she be able to do so in that properly light and disengaged manner which must have nothing of apology in it? He couldn't expect her to be always in readiness for him as though he were the only friend she had in the world. The clerk who had waited upon Mrs. Van Besten before and found her a particularly alert and capable shopper, wondered at her present absent-mindedness. Once she started and turned quickly from the counter. A tall man was passing close behind her. But it was not William, as she had for an instant believed—only a customer. "That's all for to-day, I think." She sat irresolutely on the revolving seat before the counter. No, she could not see William. He might misunderstand. She had entirely for-



gotten little Joe. When she rose to leave Van Besten's, she remembered Joe. She looked around for him in vain. No one had seen the small boy flit away. With misgiving upon her, she hurried out to the street. She reproached herself for her carelessness. How could she have let the child out of her sight? Oh, it was inexcusable of her.

She looked up and down the street. He could not be far away. Her straining eyes demanded the chubby, blue-clad figure. Her anxiety fluttered more boisterously. Sally pressed her hand quickly against her jumping heart. Of course nothing could happen to him. What could happen? She went from one to another of all the places to which she had taken him, looking expectantly in all the doors she passed. The people whom she stopped to ask if they had noticed a small, curly-haired boy in a blue suit were interested and sympathetic, but could give her no clue. Someone advised her to inquire at the police station and she hurried there with fresh hope only to be disappointed. Where was he, little tender Joe, who had never been anywhere from home before to-day? Her startled imagination conjured up pictures of him struggling in the rough grasp of big, jeering, brutal boys, or bitten by a savage dog, or run down by some truck. The little heedless child knew nothing of town streets. She grew sick and faint at the train of hideous possibilities which presented themselves.



Her load of anxiety became intolerable. Breathless, almost exhausted, she hurried back to Van Besten's. Heedless of the clerks, she passed quickly through the store to William's office, tapped on the door, then opened it precipitately without waiting for an answer. William rose in surprise. "Why, Sally!" He caught her hands.

"William, I'm in such trouble. You must help me. You must tell me what to do."

His pulses leaped to her appeal. In her agitation, her impulsiveness, she was all feminine.

"What is it, dear? Tell me." He caught her arm to steady her. For an instant she leaned against him with a blessed sense of help at hand. Then she straightened herself. "William, I've lost Joe. I can't find him anywhere. I've been to the police station. I've been everywhere. Oh, I'm so frightened about him!"

"Nonsense," William said reassuringly. "The boy's probably all right. Compose yourself, Sally. We'll find him. You're frightening yourself unnecessarily, I'm sure."

His resolute matter-of-fact tone calmed her. "Oh, I hope so. I hope so. Oh, William, if anything happened to Joe I never could face Annie!" She looked piteous.

"Sit down a minute." William touched her arm again.

"Oh, I couldn't sit down!"

"Yes, you can. No use exhausting yourself. I'm going out with you directly, but I want to



understand first." Involuntarily she yielded to his calm compulsion and sat down. William was a prop. "When did you miss him?"

"More than an hour ago. It's time now for Perry to start back. I don't know what to do."

"Let Perry go along. I'll drive you and the boy down later. Where is Perry? At the post office? I'll step over and tell him to go along, and send some word to Annie that'll save her all anxiety. Wait here, Sally. I'll be back for you in five minutes. Why, Sally, it's not like you to go to pieces like this!"

"It's Annie—the thought of Annie's face if I had to go home without Joe." She looked at him in agony, craving reassurance.

"Why conjure up horrors? In all probability the boy's all right."

In the most natural way in the world, William took charge of her and of the situation. She was glad to let him, to lean on his man's strength, but she felt that she had no choice in the matter. He dispelled the despair that had her in grip when she came to him. She looked up with a wavering effort to appear composed.

"I know you think I'm dreadfully foolish to go to pieces this way. I suppose I am. William, I've no business to descend upon you in this way—a busy man like you!"

William did not answer in words. He looked at her. "Wait here, Sally," he said briskly as he left her. He was soon back, having dismissed



Perry with a noncommittal message to Mrs. Haselton. He and Sally set forth upon the search. William enlisted scouts in the quest, telephoned himself to the police station. Sally was growing more and more haggard. She would not show herself weak, hysterical, before William. Terror haunted her, dim figures of possible kidnappers maltreating the little, petted baby.

"Oh, where can he be? William, can you think of another thing to do?"

For a few minutes little Joe had enjoyed revolving on the seat beside her. But he thought that Aunt Sally was a long time buying buttons and other uninteresting things. Presently he slid down from his seat and going to the door looked out into the street. Aunt Sally looked around. "Don't go out of the door, Joe," she admonished. "I'll be through in a minute now."

But that was a long minute. Exactly across the street from Van Besten's was the drugstore. Joe and Aunt Sally had visited it earlier in the day. Great beautiful globes of color—blue and crimson and amber—bloomed in the druggist's window. They fascinated Joe, much as the glittering fruit of the enchanted tree must have fascinated Aladdin when first he wandered into magic gardens. The lovely colors allured Joe. He went slowly out of the door, across the street and stood staring at the druggist's window. Then he entered the store. He remembered that he was thirsty. His yellow-brown curls barely



reached to the marble counter. "Please give me some more?"

"Some more what, young man?" The druggist's clerk, in a white crash coat, leaned across to look down on the small customer.

Joe looked up at him respectfully. "It's pink," he explained earnestly. "It's got soap-suds on top."

"Got the spondulixs with you?"

"Sir?" Joe's innocent face looked inquiry.

"Got any money?"

Joe sought in a small pocket for a small purse. He displayed five bright pennies, all that remained of the funds with which he had started out with that morning.

The clerk swept them over to his side of the counter. "That's it. Now, what'll you take?"

"It's pink," Joe repeated.

"Are you trying to tell me you want a strawberry soda?"

Joe did not know; he waited.

The clerk mixed one and set it down before him. "Try that."

With a contented sigh, Joe grasped the tall, brimming tumbler with both hands.

"Fills the bill, does it?" The clerk reached over and gave the soda a stir. "Now go ahead."

Joe went ahead. When he had drained the last delicious drop, he stood on tiptoe to replace the tumbler on the counter. "Thank you, sir," he said.



"Don't mention it," said the druggist's clerk.

Joe went back to Main Street to see if Aunt Sally wasn't ready now. He stopped to watch the trolley cars rattling up and down. He saw a man raise his finger and the car stop and take him on. In the wonderland in which Joe was wandering to-day, that gesture was evidently one of the signs and passports. When he saw the next car coming, he stepped boldly to the curb and raised his short forefinger. The car stopped. Joe climbed aboard. He was kneeling on the seat, his face close to the window, happy in the motion and the spectacle, when the conductor touched his shoulder. "Fare, please." Joe turned inquiringly and stared up into the conductor's face.

"Where's your money, kid?"

Joe shook his head. "The man took it. It's all gone," he said sadly.

"It is, eh? What did you mean by getting on this car if you can't pay?"

"I didn't know you had to pay," Joe said simply. He looked up innocently, untearingly at the conductor, greatly impressed by his blue uniform, his round gold buttons.

"You didn't know you had to pay? The mischief you didn't!" The conductor's words were rough, but his eyes, his manner were kind. Joe felt him a friend and waited in tranquility of spirit for the big man with the gold buttons to dispose of him.

"See here, kid, where do you want to go?"



"Want to take a ride," Joe told him happily.

"Oh, you do? Well, where are your folks meanwhile?"

"My father's at the paper mill. When I'm a big man I'm going to help my father at the paper mill."

"Where do you live anyhow?"

"Home," said Joe.

"Well, you're going to get your ride all right," the conductor admitted. "I can't drop a stray kid like you out on the street. You'll have to go along now all the way to North Kirton and then I'll fetch you back again to where I picked you up. I reckon you're givin' somebody a good scare." Unconcernedly Joe knelt up on the seat again to look out of the window.

The trolley jangling its leisurely way up Main Street stopped on the corner. Joe climbed down the steps, propelled in part by the strong guiding hand of the conductor. He stood bewildered, wondering where Aunt Sally was. Another moment and his fortitude would have deserted him. Then he felt himself clutched.

"There he is!" Sally had flown to him, caught hold of him, hugged him, shook him. "Oh, Joe, you darling! You wicked, wicked boy! How could you run away from Aunt Sally?"

Joe's blue eyes grew round with amazement at Aunt Sally's excitement.

William Van Besten regarded the culprit with no unkindness. "Step back to the store for a few minutes, will you, Sally, and I'll order my horse."



## CHAPTER XIX

### IN THE FIELDS

“WILLIAM, you are very restless to-day.” Sally spoke lightly, in an effort to restore ease that she felt to be lacking. She sat in a corner of the sofa, and near her, drawn companionably near, was a big hospitable chair. She glanced at William and then invitingly toward the chair. But William seemed to shun cushioned ease. He continued to wander around the room, to gaze absently from the windows out at the autumnal sunshine.

“Have you been out for a walk to-day?” he asked abruptly. “No? Then what do you say to a tramp instead of sitting in this warm room all the afternoon?”

The request sounded insistent. He seemed consumed by some inner irritation that she did not entirely fathom. He came close to her, bending over, his face close to her's. “Come, won't you?”

She felt him hesitate a moment before he took her hand and drew her gently to her feet.



Sally looked merry and girlish as she laughingly yielded. Life had grown easier since she had determined not to question any longer but to accept this pleasant, enlivening companionship simply with a good grace."

"You needn't be so persuasive. I'm perfectly willing to take a walk."

She, as well as he, felt imperious need of wandering away from the placid everyday setting, out somewhere into the vague space of dreams. She, too, was intolerably restless.

Annie saw her coming downstairs with coat and hat. "Are you going out, Sally? I don't suppose you're going anywhere near the mill?" She looked perplexed.

"Why?"

"Ed Moore's just been here with a note for Joe. It's from his father about that straw. I'd like Joe to have it. I tried to find one of the Thompson children to send over with it, but I couldn't."

"We're just going for a walk. We can go that way as well as not." Sally took the note. Swiftly into her mind came the satisfying recollection that they could go out the back door and take a short cut to the mill. She and William need not parade through the village street, which both detested doing.

William, eager and gratified, was waiting to help her on with her coat. As they went out into the hall, little Joe's pattering feet sounded on



the porch. Sally put up her hand with a cautioning gesture.

"Hush, there comes Joe. This way, William. The back door. If he sees us, he'll want to go to. He'll cry. We'll have a scene. Hurry!"

Stealthily, like conspirators, they slipped through the back hall. While Joe's short arms were reaching for the front doorknob, they closed the back door behind them. Sally laughed gleefully. "Safe from pursuit," she ejaculated dramatically. "Now, William!" Like mischievous children they sped across the yard and through the side gate to the country road which led into the village.

It was not far to the mill. Joseph saw them coming and opened his office door to greet them.

"Well, hello, unexpected pleasure!"

"Annie wanted you to have this note." Sally handed it to him. "So we told her we'd bring it."

"Much obliged." He gave the two a quizzical look of humorous comprehension, which they pretended not to notice. Then he became the eager host. "William, you've never seen my mill, have you? Now you're here you must take a look around. Of course, it's an old story to Sally."

With bustling pride Joseph conducted them.

The low, plum-colored mill was a pleasant and peaceful spot in which to earn one's livelihood. So William thought. The great pale amber straw stacks were its props and sentinels. One



was half demolished. A couple of Joe's hands were pulling it down, loading it on handtrucks and bearing it into the building to be converted into pulp.

"I've splendid water power, you see."

The three watched the great wheel churn the water into foam. Above the dam lay the mill pond, glassy smooth. The whirr of machinery was like the busy hum of gigantic insects, not inharmonious.

"Come inside."

They went with him from press to press, saw the pulp put in at one end and emerge brown and wet, in great sheets of paper, at the other. Then it was spread in the dryers. In one room a couple of youths were arranging the paper in bundles to be taken to Kirton. Joseph supplied many Kirton shops. What was not marketed there was shipped thence to New York. For the moment William gave his mind entirely to paper making. He asked pertinent questions and listened thoughtfully to Joseph's explanation. Sally quite wondered at his interest. He seemed almost to have forgotten her.

"Step in here. This is my office. Glass all around, you see, so that I can keep an eye on what's going on outside."

Annie's photograph and little Joe's in plain frames stood on Joseph's desk. He saw William look at them.

"I like to keep my family in sight, you see,"



he confessed, in his bluff, cheerful way. "It feels sort of good to look at 'em once in awhile, and remember that they're waiting for me in the old sheebang."

As they said good-bye and pursued their way, William knew that they were leaving a contented man.

Without a word, by common consent, they avoided the lane that led to the Deep Hole. That way was invested with disagreeable recollections. There they had wrestled with differences of opinion to no purpose and had wounded each other. They had suffered since when they had tried to be content apart. But to-day all was to be gay and pleasant between them if Sally could make it so.

As they went away from the village, the stretches between the houses became longer and longer. The fronts of the farm-houses had the closed and forbidding aspect of the disused. Their occupants lived mainly in the kitchen and in the rear rooms, keeping with mistaken unselfishness their best rooms all shut up for the rare, great occasions. Nearly everybody was busy out of doors. The sprites of autumn were abroad—piling heaps of red apples and of green in the orchards, rolling together the glowing pumpkins, heaping up the yellow corn. The air was charged with fruity smells. The rustling cornstalks sounded pleasantly as the farmer, sitting in the sunshine on a bundle of stalks in the lee of the shock, ripped off



the silvery husks. There was a great deal doing on the farms to-day. Sally and William stopped at a barn door to watch a horse plodding with patient good-will its wearisome, unending way up and up a thrashing machine. The rye rolled out on the floor, a glistening heap bristling with chaff. On either side a man thrust back the yellow straw which sooner or later was likely to find its way to Joe Haselton's mill. The coming of the threshers was one of the year's important events. Then the farmer's wives cooked generous supplies of pies and cakes, and their husbands and children looked forward to feasting. The work was hard. The threshers, covered with sweat and dust and prickly chaff, were supported by the prospect of washing up and satisfying their toil-stimulated appetites. The owner of the thrashing machine lived in the neighborhood. They were friends and equals of those who employed them and when the day was over would sit down with them for a social hour or so before stretching out their weary muscles in bed.

"It's a fine sight, all this wholesome out-of-door toil," William commented.

"Oh, look at that!" Sally started with a thrill of repulsion. In a corner of the orchard they were passing, a butchering had just taken place. Three men and a boy were too intent upon their task to more than glance at the two pedestrians. The fair beauty of the day had been tarnished here. The ground was trampled and blood-



stained. Two hogs, scraped and split, hung from an orchard bough. Their smooth skin gleamed white. Their jaws, which had protested against the violent death allotted them, were still wide open. From a crossbar swung on two forked uprights, hung an enormous black kettle in which lard was being tried out. The smell of the bubbling fat floated through the orchard boughs. Every member of the family was lending a hand in the butchering. Under a small shed near by the women were preparing the hockies, the ears, for souse, and cutting up meat for headcheese, and setting aside the sausage meat to be minced and seasoned.

“Poor things!” Sally apostrophized the hogs. She found something appealing in their gaunt white bodies. But the farmer’s family knew no weak, sentimental pity. They worked cheerfully in the midst of raw, unpleasant odors and the heavy sizzle of the fat. To them butchering promised fresh pork fixings and plenty of excellent winter cheer. William and Sally hurried on as fast as they could.

“Weren’t you ever coming down to see us anymore?” She looked at him with challenge, yet with a touch of wistful reproach.

“Did you miss me? Are you glad I’ve come to-day?” He was very serious.

Sally surprised herself. She could not appear lightly nonchalant as she wished to appear. She had been too lonely, too many days. The unrest



of the bootless expectancy came over her again and she knew that she wanted no more of it. "Yes," she said, simply and earnestly.

"Then you'll see more of me," William assured her buoyantly.

"You know I wrote. You know I was sorry to disappoint you. I wrote you our visit had all been arranged before I heard you were coming."

"I understand that, Sally, but I understand something else, too. I knew that if you had wanted to see me as much as I wanted to see you, I wouldn't have found the empty house at the end of my journey."

Sally did not answer.

"That wasn't all, you know. What about the time before that, when I arrived only to find that you'd gone driving with some man. Who was it, Sally?" There was another note now in his voice.

"Oh, that day! Why, I was out with Ed Allen that day. How did I know you were going to come?"

"I remember the fellow, but how did you come to be driving with Ed Allen anyway?"

"Now really, William!" Sally was half laughing, half vexed. "Why not, if I wanted to?" Then she relented before a certain sternness in William's dissatisfied countenance. "William, please don't be foolish. Ed had to take a long drive to collect money due on a mortgage, and he asked me to go along for company. Why, I've



known Ed Allen ever since we were babies. We used to be taken out in the same baby carriage."

"That's no reason why you should keep on in the same carriage, is it?" But William's tone was easier. He regarded her with a mollified expression. The cloud of constraint was fast evaporating. The sparkling air made them buoyant and cheerful.

At nearly every place something interesting, something significant of the season was going on. They went their way like two children keen for all the sights and sounds. The pungent smell of pumice came to them.

"They must be making cider at the Keeners'," Sally said. "They have a press, William. Aren't you thirsty? Let's investigate." Lifting her skirts daintily, she picked her way across the debris of a barnyard through a surprised congregation of chickens, ducks, and turkeys. The cider press was on the other side of the barn. Mr. Keener and his son nodded taciturn but friendly greeting.

"How do you do, Mr. Keener? I wonder if we could have a sip of your cider?"

"All you want and welcome," the farmer told them. "Only you'll have to drink out of the bung, I reckon. We ain't got no cup."

William laughed out. "It's a case for straws, Sally. I haven't sucked cider through a straw since I was ten years old."

"There's plenty of straws." Mr. Keener



waved hospitably toward the upper barn. "Go along in and choose for yerselves and drink as much cider as yer a mind ter. Apples is plenty this fall." Sally selected the straws. William cut them into long even lengths with his sharp knife. Mr. Keener regarded them benevolently when they came out of the barn. "This 'ere's no good yet," he said. "It was apples an hour ago. Try that barrel yonder." He obligingly drew the bung for them.

Perched on stones on either side of the fat iron-bound barrel, William and Sally took long satisfying draughts of the cold sweet cider which, as Mr. Keener said, was "just beginning to get a head onto it." Their heads came very close together. Their laughing faces almost touched. Their straws clashed and they gaily upbraided each other. For two sedate people they were certainly behaving childishly, falling into senseless merriment at the veriest trifle. Mr. Keener and his son watched them with sympathetic grins. Sally and William rose up from the cider barrel finally, flushed with the exertion of drinking from it.

"That was good! Thank you, Mr. Keener. You mustn't forget to bring some of your cider to the house next time you come to the village. My brother will want some, I know," Sally said. They went their way.

"This road is pretty thickly settled, isn't it?" The bars of a pasture were drawn open—



William turned into the field. Sally went docilely at his side. The Manorton creek, growing smaller and smaller as it neared its origin in the hills, coursed through the pasture. The stems of the weeds and grasses on its edges were spangled with thinnest glass-clear ice, but in the middle the current ran deep and strong, swollen with the fall rains. A cow trail meandered on from field to field. They followed it aimlessly. Little green burrs or two-legged beggars clung to Sally's blue skirt. When William would have picked them off, she stopped him. "What is the use? I'll only gather more." For every grass, every weed, was freighted with the harvest which it was impelled to fling abroad. Shining little seeds stored in all manner of dainty pouches and baskets were only waiting transportation. From bursting milkweed pods sailed tiny balloons. Tall thistles stood with rakish gray dishevelled hair.

Sally and William did not find much to say to each other, but the world seemed a glad place. They sat down on a sunny stone wall to watch the squirrels at work in a group of shagbarks. They, too, were harvesting. They ran up the tattered gray bark, up into the crown of rusty leaves and brought down the plump nuts and carried them off to secret hoards. In the sunshine the air was warm and mellow. In the shade, or when at moments the breeze quickened, Jack Frost indicated his dancing presence close



at hand, gave them slight, saucy tweaks to remind them of him. The two figures on the crumbling wall sat close together, silent for a time.

Then William's hand crept gently over and lifted Sally's hand from her lap and held it in a warm, close clasp. Dreamily happy, they sat and watched the golden sparkle of the autumnal world. Maple leaves, scarlet and gold and lingering jade, drifted down about them and flecked the stone wall with lovely color. At last William's gaze made Sally spring from the stone wall.

"Come, let's go on."

"Why, there's the old Frenchman's cabin," Sally exclaimed. "I'd forgotten all about him. I haven't been out as far as this for a great while."

"Who is the old Frenchman?"

"He's a recluse. He built this cabin for himself years ago, far away from anybody else, and there he lives all alone. There was a wife once, I believe, but she died before I knew anything about him. He's a great mystery, you know. People have never been able to find out what brought him to this country, to this lonely place, what made him adopt this singular life of solitude. He's always cheerful. He has a passion for flowers. In the summertime his little yard overflows with them. Some choice things, too. You'd be surprised."

The cabin did not suggest unhappy withdrawal from the world. It looked snug and pleasant perched on a ledge of hillside, with a fine wooded



slope rising behind it. Its low roof was a ruddy red. Its clapboarded sides were unpainted, except by the artist weather, who had turned them to a deep-toned gray. Bunches of red peppers, of golden seed corn, hung against the gray boards under the deep eaves. The one window of many little panes was banked with plants, geraniums and fuchias and pink oxalis, in tin cans and rough boxes.

Sally and William looked at the cabin through a long vista of bean-poles, their slender tops brought together and tied artistically with grape-vine stems. The bean vines were sere now and rustled emptily in the breeze. In summer, when the s̄c̄arlet and white runners waved dainty banners as they climbed up and up, the approach to the Frenchman's house was beautiful.

"In the summer he brings vegetables into Manorton and sells them from door to door," Sally explained. "We often buy from him. I always like to have Pierre come. He's so cheery and pleasant. He always seems to me the happiest person I know. You wouldn't think he could be, would you, old and in a foreign land all alone?"

"Very creditable of him, certainly." William was watching her animated face with open pleasure.

Perhaps the recluse divined human companionship drawing near. He opened his door and stood on its threshold peering down at them through the bean arbor, a smile on his plain old



face. It was rugged and furrowed, framed in grizzly locks, his blue eyes looking forth as simply and frankly as a child's. A wise looking black poodle stood beside him.

"Let's go in and see him for a few minutes. He'll be pleased."

Silently acquiescent, William pushed open the gate.

"We won't be able to have much conversation with him. His English is so broken that it's hard to understand. Whatever you say to him he nods and smiles, but I'm sure it doesn't mean much to him."

"Good afternoon, Pierre."

"Bon jour, mademoiselle, monsieur." Old Pierre gave them affable welcome. He pushed open his door with a gesture of invitation.

"No, thank you, Pierre. We won't go in to-day, but I wanted Mr. Van Besten to see what a pleasant little place you have. May I show him your summer house?"

"But yes, mademoiselle."

He led through another vista of bean arbor at the side of the house, a few steps to the summit of a stony knoll. Here he had built a summer house roofed over, the four sides open. A rustic bench ran around it. A rustic table stood in the middle. Everything within the rustic place was trim and betokened thrift. Old Pierre's domain was like a bit of peasant France transplanted to the State of New York.



"It is belle, n'est ce pas?" The old Frenchman waved his hands enthusiastically toward his fair, wide prospect. From the summer house one looked far over hill and field and clearing, through which meandered the Manorton creek. Nestled among treetops that looked from here thicker than they were in reality, emerged the Manorton roofs, the church spire. They saw smoke rising from the tall chimneys of the paper mill.

"This is Pierre's dining-room when the weather is warm enough. He likes the companionship of seeing the houses."

"Pretty cold comfort, though, I should think." William looked at Pierre's broad, serene face with interested curiosity. "Pretty lonely isn't it sometimes?"

"Plait-il?"

"Mr. Van Besten thinks you must be very lonely, Pierre?"

He gave them a wise smile, then bent over and patted his poodle. "I have Memot here and my flowers, enough always to eat, plenty wood to burn. It suffices."

William felt something like envy of this weather-beaten old man. "Then you're happy?"

"Happiness? But that is for the young, monsieur. It passes, that. For me I am content. You regard still what has ahead, monsieur. But me, I have no future. The past that is what the old regard. When you are an old man like me, monsieur, you too will live chiefly on your memories."



"You are a philosopher, Pierre. Ready, Sally?"

"Attendez one minute." Pierre hastily gathered the few belated chrysanthemums that still bloomed on the ragged-leaved bushes. The small ruddy buttons of velvety maroon defied the frost from the sunny shelter of the wall. With a foreign obsequiousness, Pierre held out the bouquet to Sally.

"Thank you, Pierre. They're lovely. I'll put them in water as soon as I get home and enjoy them for a long time."

The old man's blue eyes rested admiringly upon Sally, her bright hair loosened by the breezy walk that had deepened her color. He stood peering through the beanpoles after her and William, as long as he could see them, a round-shouldered, sturdy figure of fortitude.

The birds and the squirrels had gone to bed.

The frolicsome mood that belonged to sunshine and activity yielded as the shadows lengthened to one more pensive, though still happy and serene. They went on and on, talking scarcely at all. Past and future had lost significance. The present was all—the present of two in happy isolation, of fellowship in the peaceful, unexacting fields.

Sally stopped suddenly. "William, we must have come a long way."

"Are you tired?"

"No, but then—there's all the way back, you know."



“Yes, there’s all the way back.” His voice exulted in the distance. They turned. For a long time they went dreamily hand in hand. Then, with a gesture of swift uncontrollable desire, William drew her closer. Though at first she seemed to hold off, there was no real resistance. He knew there was none. With his arm around her, shoulder to shoulder, her step falling in with his, they went home through the gloaming.



## CHAPTER XX

### A GREAT CATASTROPHE

THE dream was timeless, spaceless, a happy obsession. Then, after the fashion of dreams, it vanished. They halted suddenly, moved by a common impulse.

"What do you suppose that is?" Sally demanded, in a frightened way. For clouds of tawny smoke lay over Manorton. As they drew near, they heard the shrill bell of the Manorton fire engine—the cries of men and boys.

"William, that smoke's near us. You don't suppose it's our house?"

"The hotel maybe!" William said excitedly. They hurried on. The thickening shadows wrapped them with foreboding. Dread settled down upon Sally's spirit. She had been very happy that afternoon. Now life grew difficult again. She felt unspeakably oppressed, almost as though she were going to be punished because she had been so unjustifiably happy.

All Manorton seemed to be pressing through the shadowy street. Someone laid convulsively



hold on Sally. "Why, Sally Haselton, is that you? Yes, it's your house. They're doing all they can to save it."

"What started the fire?" William asked.

"Nobody knows."

"Oh, I hope Annie and Joe are all right!" Sally rushed on impetuously, pushing past others on their way to the fire. The smoke grew denser, more acrid. A flare of flame pointed the way ominously. The Haselton gate stood open. The yard was filled with people huddled in groups, speaking in suppressed, awed tones as they watched the efforts of the village firemen. In the strange, fantastic light, compounded of blaze and smoke and gathering night, spectral forms moved about grotesquely up on the roof.

"What are they doing up there?" William asked.

"Flinging down wet quilts and blankets. They think they can save the front part of the house," someone told him.

"Where's Annie? Where's Mrs. Haselton? Can't somebody tell me?" Sally demanded, in anguish of anxiety.

"There she is, over yonder. Under the locust tree." William guided her across the yard.

Annie scarcely heeded them when they joined her. Pale and intense, she stood watching the destruction of the home to which Joe Haselton had brought her when they were married. Her expression of strong absorption did not change.



"I can't make Joe come away," she said drearily.

"Where's little Joe?" Sally asked.

"He's all right. Millie's looking after him."

"How did it happen, Annie?" William asked.

Annie was straining her eyes to distinguish Joe among the firemen. "I don't know. I think it must have been that flue that Joe would insist on putting in a little while ago to heat the spare room. Little Joe and I were over at Mrs. Lanson's most of the afternoon. Soon after we got home I heard a queer kind of sound, sort of a rumble, but I couldn't find out where it came from. I looked everywhere. I thought perhaps we were going to have an earthquake shock. It was so queer that I thought I'd better go over to the mill and tell Joe. Then I was afraid that was foolish, so I waited. Then, all of a sudden, I smelt smoke, and there it was bursting out of the hall wall and in the sitting-room in half a dozen places at once. I just grabbed little Joe and ran out and gave the alarm. William, can't you persuade Joe to come away? He's so reckless and excited. I'm sure he'll get hurt."

"I'll see what I can do, Annie." William looked down into her troubled eyes with strong, kind sympathy.

Was the fine old homestead destined to go up in smoke? An extraordinary realization of the transitoriness of everything smote Sally like a blow. She had never felt anything like it before. Hitherto home had seemed as fixed



as the soil on which it had stood so long. The Haselton house had been the first substantial house built in Manorton. The entire community would mourn if the landmark perished. The village fire department worked heroically, Joe Haselton with the others.

"Oh, I wish he'd let the old house burn!" Annie spoke helplessly, longingly. "But he won't. He will keep on trying to save something else. If I had the strength of a man I'd make him come," she said savagely. Sally did not heed.

Treasures of childhood and girlhood—dear, unreplaceable trifles of moment—flitted in swift succession across her mind. She started forward, but William laid a restraining hand on her arm. "What are you going to do?"

"See, there's Joe!" Annie cried out. They saw him emerge from the smoke enveloped porch carrying something large and square. "That must be your mother's picture. I wish he'd let it burn and come away."

"Let me go, William," Sally cried. "If Joe can get in, I can. I must get up to my room for a minute."

"You can't do it," William said decidedly. "What do you want? I'll get it for you if it is possible."

"No, I must go myself, William. Stop holding me," she cried, imperatively. But William's hold only grew the firmer.

"Be sensible, Sally. The house is full of



smoke. The walls may fall in any moment. I won't have you attempt it."

Sparkling with wrath, she gave him a rebellious glance. Her small fingers sought in vain to pull away his hand. Then she desisted. It was too ignominious to struggle against the masterful hold.

"Please let go of me, William. I'm sure I could get in just for a minute. You've no business to hold me as though I were a child."

He paid no attention to her words. His grasp slipped from her arm, clasped both her reluctant hands. "Listen, Sally. You can do nothing. A woman would be only in the way yonder. Distract the men. Now I may be able to help—may save something, or look after Joe. But I can't go as long as I'm afraid you'll do something rash. I won't have you endangering yourself if I have to stand here and hold you until that fire burns out. Won't you be sensible? Let me go and help. Don't hold me in this useless way."

"I'm not holding you," she cried indignantly. "I wish you would go."

"Yes, but I can't go until you promise me that you won't try to get into the house. Promise me, Sally, and then I can go."

Their wills clashed—her's defiant, impetuous, unstable, his as strong and unswerving as his clasp on her hands. Their wills had clashed before now, but this time there was a difference. That seemed a long moment while they looked at each other. They forgot to remember other



people's eyes, though indeed curiosity had sufficient other food that night, and was not concerned with them.

"I—I promise," Sally said faintly.

With a keen, bright look, William dropped her hands and started toward the house. But now it was Sally's turn to catch and hold fast. "Wait, William. If it isn't safe for me it isn't safe for you either. Don't try to get in the house. If things must burn, they must."

"Don't worry, dear. I'll be careful." She looked up quickly at his tone. "See, the men are still bringing things out. There's Joe again. I must go help him." He was off. Sally stood desolately beside Annie under the locust tree. Mr. Allen Mackenzie came and stood near her, as though desiring to prop her courage by his friendly presence.

"I'm glad your father didn't live to see this," he said, in a broken, awed sort of way. "He loved every stick and stone of the old place."

"Splendid fellows!" Mrs. Lanson apostrophized the firemen. "They're doing everything that's possible. They'll save it yet, Mrs. Haselton, Sally." Her eyes were full of tears. She was pale with sympathy. She tried to cheer and encourage her friends.

"I wish they'd let it burn if it wants to, and make Joe Haselton come away." Annie was growing bitter in her distress.

The dim figures ceased to go and come with



loads from the house. The task had grown too dangerous. A huddle of furniture stood on the lawn. Books and bricabrac were flung down pell-mell. The parlor mantel vases and Annie's rolling pin lay together on the sitting-room sofa. Clothing, torn hastily from the clothes-presses, lay in heaps across chairs. There seemed something shockingly indecent in this sudden dragging forth of the plenishings of the staid old house. The flames were being subdued, but the south side of the house, the living-room, the delightful old kitchen, that had been loved of generation after generation of Haseltons, were blackened ruins. Grimy as a collier, his eyes bloodshot with smoke and excitement, his clothes and his hands singed, Joe Haselton worked recklessly to save his household treasures. In vain the others, brave fellows, too, besought him to come away. "Come on, Joe, it's foolhardy to stay longer," they adjured him, but Joe would not be restrained. A crazy kind of exultation possessed him as he fought for his possessions. William tried to get him away. "Joe, this isn't right. You ought to remember Annie. You're terrifying her to death by keeping this up. Out with you, man! Let Annie know you're safe."

The sense of the words scarcely reached Joe's excited mind. "Yes, yes, I'll come in a minute. There's one more thing upstairs I'm bound to have." He darted through the reek of smoke in which William, lingering on the threshold, felt



half stifled. As Joe came staggering downstairs with loaded arms, the hall ceiling crashed down, bearing with it the heavy hall chandelier. The smoking plaster fell on William. Somewhere under it, under the broken chandelier, lay Joe. Half dazed in the intolerable atmosphere, William groped blindly. Then he caught hold of unconscious Joe, succeeded in extricating him, and pulled him toward the door. With a great thankfulness he felt the night air reaching his tortured lungs; then, spent and scorched, he fell into the arms outstretched to seize him and Joe. The flames were dying now, the smoke drifting away. People were hurrying home.

"Is that all there's going to be?" asked little Joe, with a sigh of disappointment that the excitement should end.

Sitting on Millie Stetson's lap in a side window, he had been an engrossed spectator of the tragedy in his home. The house still stood, but it was greatly damaged.

The Haselton family took refuge with Millie and Morris Stetson. Every home in Manorton was open to them. The sudden catastrophe that had befallen them called out quick, warm expression of sympathy and friendship from the reticent village folks. Joe Haselton, still unconscious, had been put to bed in the spare room of the Thompson house. His burns were not severe, but he had received a heavy blow upon his head; one arm was broken.



The doctor did all he could and went away. He had tried to reassure palid Mrs. Haselton, but serious misgiving pierced through his well-meant noncommittal phrases.

Not knowing and not caring whether or not the fire was still raging, Annie Haselton knelt beside her husband's bed, her attention concentrated upon him, her soul in her anxious eyes. Sally sat over by the window. The hours when she and William had roamed the fields, like care-free rollicking children, when she had walked close beside him, within his arm, both under a mystical spell that held them silent and content, seemed far back in time. She had been happy then. Now her heart felt very heavy. Was she going to lose Joe—good, kind, hard-working Joe, whose brotherly loyalty and concern for her she now reproached herself for never half appreciating? It could not be. It must not. "Spare him, God," Sally's heart prayed. The long, inert figure moved slightly. A fluttering breath like a sigh caught Annie's ear and Sally's. Very slowly Joseph Haselton came back to consciousness and opened eyes still bloodshot from smoke and flame. Slowly, very slowly, recollection came to him. "Is the house gone?" he gasped.

"I don't know. I don't care," Annie spoke impetuously. She seemed curiously changed from her usual easy-going self as she clasped Joe in her arms. "Don't bother about the house, dear. What's the house to me compared to you?"



Home's anywhere I can have you and little Joe." She spoke with passion. Sally had never known that her matter-of-fact brother Joe could wear such an expression as now came to him as he looked up at his wife. Heart and soul made his eyes luminous. He and Annie understood each other. They had no need of words.

Presently Joe said weakly, "It's going to impoverish us. Make things mighty hard for you, I'm afraid."

Annie kissed the foreboding words away from his lips. "We're young and strong. We can economize. We can work. I don't care if we are poor for awhile. I don't care." She smiled at him, quivering with love and courage.

"Dear girl!" Joe tried to lift himself toward her, but he was still too weak. Instantly, her lashes still wet with tears of tenderness, Annie became the nurse, maternal, authoritative. "Don't stir, Joe. You mustn't. You mustn't exert yourself at all." Her smiling lips trembled. Her tender voice quivered, then she flung herself upon him. "Oh, Joe, I'm so glad I've got you still!" She laughed brokenly. "You great big bad boy! How you frightened me! Bad boy!"

Sally knew that she was far from the consciousness of husband and wife. She felt drearily remote, alone, forgotten. She felt like an eaves-dropper. As Annie bent over Joe again, her arm across his breast, Sally knew that she had no



right to be there, a spectator of the intimate tender moment. Very quietly she left the room. Downstairs in Millie's sitting-room an anxious group were awaiting a report from the sick room. They were trying to be cheerful and to talk hopefully, but in spite of themselves they spoke in subdued tones, their ears alert for any sound from upstairs. William was there, waiting to see Sally again. Mr. Allen Mackenzie sat in the armchair which had become his home seat at Millie's hearth. He felt that he was among his friends, sharing their sorrow. Although he had lost Harlan Morgan, life was less desolate than it had promised to be. Millie's young brothers, with elbows leaning on the table, a pretence of school-books before them, listened delightedly to the interesting converse of their elders.

Millie and Morris were indefatigable in their efforts to make their guests comfortable, to offer them all the cheer in their power. The atmosphere was vibrant with warm good-will. Frequently Millie was called out to the parlor to see someone who had come to inquire after Mr. Haselton, to express sympathy, to proffer help. The Haseltons stood high in the village esteem. Their friends gathered to them in their trouble, with a warm-hearted wish of service.

Sally came quietly into the sitting-room. "How is he, Sally?" Millie's manner showed that she felt timorous of putting the question.

"I think he's better. He's come to himself.



He seems perfectly clear-minded now," Sally answered.

"That's good," Allen Mackenzie ejaculated, with a nod indicating relief. "I'm glad to hear that."

To William, unnoticed by her, Sally conveyed an odd effect of absentmindedness. She was still dominated by the scene upstairs from which she had come. She could not detach her mind from the dimly lighted bed-chamber where Joseph, wan and helpless, lay so near the verge of the mysteries, with Annie rekindling life within him by her great enveloping love. Sally had seen how adequate each was to the other's need, requiring no one else to satisfy heart hunger. Didn't she love Joe as well as Annie did? An aching sense of being left out still lay on their sister's spirit.

With an impulse of sympathy Millie came up and put an arm around her friend. "Don't stand there. You look so tired. Won't you go and lie down for a little while? Do, Sally. The blue room is all ready for you. Little Joe's in bed there now. I'm going to have the divan in the spare room made up for Mrs. Haselton. I know she won't leave Mr. Haselton, but perhaps she'll let some of us spell her at the watching. Do lie down, won't you?"

Sally shook her head decidedly. "Thank you, Millie. You're as kind and thoughtful as you can be, but I can't possibly lie down now."

"The doctor said he'd look in again in an hour or so."



"I know." Without regarding the others, in a lifeless kind of way Sally went out of the room. They heard the front door softly open and close. William Van Besten went quickly after her, overtook her at the gate. "Where are you going, Sally?" As he spoke he laid about her a warm cape which he had caught up from Millie's hat rack. The night air was chill. The stars shone frostily clear. His care for her soothed the great loneliness in her heart. She was glad that the night concealed the tears that sprang to her eyes. She could not answer him until she had waited an instant to steady her voice.

"I was only going to see if it was all really true," she said, in a low unsteady voice. "It seems as though it must be just a horrible dream. Such a little while ago we felt so happy and safe—and now——" Her voice trembled. "I'm so anxious about Joe." William's silence was full of sympathy.

"Joe's a vigorous fellow," he said presently, "and he loves his life. The doctor will pull him through, never fear." William pushed open the Haselton gate and they entered the deserted yard. The ground, softened by recent rains, not yet stiffened by severe frost, was a slough from the trampling of many feet. The trim flower beds and the box borders which Joe Haselton delighted in keeping trim, were ruined. Ghostly shapes of furniture showed vaguely under the trees. The front door, wide open upon a ruined and blackened interior, gave an effect of unspeakable



desolation. They stood on the path looking up at it. She moved close to William, feeling it a comfort to have him beside her, realizing that, after all, she could not have endured to stand shudderingly alone in the despoiled yard. Presently she went slowly upon the porch and glanced within the house. William drew her gently back. "I wouldn't do that; it's hardly safe."

"I always supposed that Annie had a great deal of pride in and affection for this place." Sally spoke almost resentfully.

"Hasn't she?"

"She told Joe just now that she didn't care whether it was burned or not. She said that the only home she cared about was any place where she and Joe and the baby were together."

There was a silence.

"That's a pretty fine way for Annie to feel," William said presently. "You love this place very much, don't you, Sally?"

"I never thought before whether I did or not." She spoke drearily. "I was born here. My whole life has been passed here. I never thought of anything happening to the home. To see it in ruins makes me feel so helpless, so denuded." She could not go on.

"But it isn't gone," he said, cheerfully. "There's a lot of the old house left. It can be patched up, rebuilt."

She glanced up at him with a pitiful appeal for sympathy. "The old kitchen's utterly gone. To



think of all the good times we've had there. And the sitting-room's gone. William, I shall always see it just as it was when you and I started out this afternoon. The fire was low on the hearth. I thought of putting on another stick. I'm glad now I didn't. I can just see Grandfather Haselton's picture staring down from over the sofa. I wonder if it was saved? How I am going to miss our old things, the things I've been used to seeing all my life." Her voice shook.

William longed to comfort. As they stood together in the brooding twilight, he laid his arms gently about her and drew her close. Sally did not resist. Nor did she resist when he drew her down with him into a deep old sofa, that turned out of doors to-night, had stood in the Haselton parlor for thirty years or more. To-night it stood on the frost encrusted lawn, and leaned against a locust tree.

William and Sally sank down into its cushioned depths. His arms were still enfolding her. Her head lay restfully on his shoulder. She sighed softly, but she never moved when William's warm breath came closer, closer, and his lips sought her brow.

He uttered short, disconnected, endearing words of comfort, of petting, in a low, moved whisper. Sally listened.



## CHAPTER XXI

### SALLY'S REVOLT

SALLY lay on the divan in Millie's spare room, her wakeful eyes resting on the shaded night lamp. Annie had been persuaded to leave her husband for a few hours to go to bed in another room. Joseph lay sound asleep in the spare-room bed. Sleep, the doctor said, was the best possible thing for him. He was not to be roused from it even for his medicine. It was some comfort to see his wan face relaxed, to feel that for a little while he was untroubled, unsuffering.

His sister would have preferred more active tending than this passive watching, something to hold her from thought. As she lay there in the silent room life grew ominous and mysterious. In the black night toward dawn she wrestled with miseries new to her. She felt that after twenty-eight easy going years she was just beginning to know something of life. Could a human being withstand such compulsions? Humbly, with tears swelling up from her heart, Sally promised herself never to judge anyone again. For she had



learned that only the ignorant because untempted, may point fingers of scorn. To-morrow morning would soon be here when she would see William again. She looked forward to the moment with both dread and longing. For she was self-convicted of falling away from her own standard of conduct, and it seemed to her that she must have fallen in William's esteem. What strange new freedom she had shown him out in the fields on that twilight walk within his arm, last night when she had clung to him in the ruined garden. She groaned at the review, swift in self-condemnation. The excitement of the fire had unnerved her. Surely he would understand that it was only because of her excited state that she had acted as she had done.

It was strange that she did not feel more engrossed by anxiety for Joe—by the disaster to the dear old home. All that seemed to form a murky background for her preoccupation.

Whither had she and William been drifting of late? She felt impelled to cast anchor, to take her bearings before going farther. For in spite of certain tugging at her heart, Sally still believed that she and William must not be more than friends. The other woman was still the insuperable obstacle to another course. But the wide-awake girl on the divan looked back with a kind of wonder at the girl who had argued so confidently that day at the Deep Hole. That Sally had believed that she knew a great deal about life in



general and had felt entirely competent to formulate a high and practical standard of conduct and then adhere to it.

But at the moment abstract mortality was less absorbing than the question how much had William cared for the woman in Kirton? The least things that she knew about her Sally gathered up for review. She was young, she was pretty. She was very pretty. Sally called up before her mental vision the bright laughing face she had seen once. She well remembered the young woman who she had passed driving with William while she herself, in Perry Hertons' mail-wagon, was unnoticed by either. William's friend had been merry that day. Even now Sally felt again the stab of discomfort with which she had observed a familiarity between them, unanalyzable, yet unmistakable. When had it begun? How long had it lasted? Sally moved restlessly back and forth on the divan. Impossible to doubt from what William had said that day at the Deep Hole, that he owed some kind of allegiance to that other. She had looked merry and confident that day. But how tragically her voice had rung out in William's house that later day. The sound of her wild sobbing came back to Sally's ears. How horrible it had been, the sudden, unlooked-for invasion of tragedy. How it had spoiled everything. Yes, she and William had known some worthwhile moments since then, but still even they had been ghost-haunted.



Sally cast reproaches at herself for seeking to forget what she should have tried to remember.

Far back in the years lay a village tragedy which, although it had occurred when she was a little girl, she would never forget. The girl who had figured in it was a worn-middle-aged woman now. She still lived in Manorton. On Sunday she went to church. She was always soberly dressed. There seemed deliberate purpose in her eschewing of all feminine adornment. Her furtive manner said, "Please don't notice me." She slipped into a far back pew and as soon as the service was over hurried away. Few greeted her. She seemed to shun greetings, any recognition. The man who had been responsible for her disgraced life also lived in Manorton. He had gone away for a year or two at the time of the scandal, but he had come back. He had married a Manorton girl. They were respectable, well-to-do people. No one shunned him. People sometimes whispered of the unpleasant past, dim in the background, but in their intercourse with him it was as though it had not been.

In the atmosphere in which Sally Haselton had been brought up it was impossible for a girl to ask questions on such a matter. She had never fully understood Edna Miller's case. But she had pitied Edna when, with all her bright youth quenched, she had emerged from seclusion into the village sight again. Sally rarely spoke of her sentiment toward the man, but she never could



bring herself to regard him with more than clod tolerance. She could never like him or help remembering when she saw his good-humored countenance, the comfortable, well-satisfied air of himself and his wife and his children. She had vowed to herself never to tolerate the generally accepted social attitude which ostracised a woman and exonerated a man for the same fault. Principle was at stake. Had she been true to principle?

Again and again in the unescapable isolation of the night watches she tried to shove humiliating recollection from her and it stole back like a tricky, malicious elf to torment her. Even in the daytime it had been in vain that she had sewed as though her task were one of life and death. Whatever she did a corroding sense of discomfiture persisted.

Once she had heard a lecture on Alfred de Musset, and the portrayal of the passionate French lover had been a revelation to her, although she had not fully understood it. Yet it had deeply interested her. "*On ne badine pas avec l'amour.*" Alfred de Musset, in his passion-driven manhood, as well as in his play, had proved the truth of the keen French adage. Was that what she, too, in her ignorance had been trying to do—to play with love? To control the power that keeps alive the whole great world, to think that she could twist and turn that in her weak woman's hands? What a fool she had been! The astounding depths of her own ignorance! Sally groaned in spirit.



Then, for her comfort, she strove to take heart of grace and to put the irretrievable behind her, and to summon resolution for a different procedure. But she could not help looking forward with great sinking of heart to William's reappearance. She felt utterly at sea as to how to receive him. Her old glad confidence in her power of self-direction had left her, leaving her singularly helpless. In spirit she held long subtle conversations with him, explaining again her own impregnable position, convincing him, reducing him to silence. Then out of the ashes of humiliation twinkled faint sparks of rehabilitating triumph. She so longed to be rehabilitated in her own eyes. This self-despite was an altogether new sensation, the bitterest she had ever known. Her very soul asked for comforting reassurance.

William, coming over from the hotel at an early hour, met Annie in the hall.

"How's Joe this morning?" he asked.

Annie sighed in a tired way. "He's very weak and discouraged but the doctor says he's better than he thought he'd find him."

Annie's tone betrayed some discouragement. Her pretty face was wan. Suffering had touched her, too, but she smiled pluckily. "Go up and speak to him for a minute, won't you, William?"

But William took her hand detainingly and paused at the foot of the stairs. "See here, Annie, you mustn't let him worry. If there's anything I can do, now or later, call on me. Promise me you



won't hesitate?" To William's dismay, Annie, spent and anxious, fell into swift tears in her effort to thank him. With an odd throwing off of his habitual formality, surprising to both of them, William laid his arm about her shoulders and patted her soothingly.

"Poor girl, you're completely tired out!"

Mrs. Haselton steadied herself with a sparkling glance. "William, do you know, I think you're dreadfully afraid that people may find out what a dear, good, kind fellow you are."

"Nonsense!" said William Van Besten, and actually flushed under her grateful look. He fairly ran away from it up to the sick-room.

"How are you, Joe? You look much more alive than when I saw you last." William went up to Joe Haselton's bed and gave the hand extended him a stout clasp. He meant his matter-of-fact manner to cloak his realization of the peril from which the other had only just emerged. Joe must not be agitated.

"Yes, I'm getting along," Joe said feebly.

"If he only wouldn't worry about things, he'd get well quicker," his wife said.

Joe moved restlessly about his bed. "Gad, it does fret a man to lie helpless as a log when he knows that he ought to be up and doing! There's no use fussing. Well, William, how's business?"

"See here, Joe, what are you worrying about? Your mill is all right. The men can keep it going until you're about again. They're good fellows.



You can trust them to do their best for you."

"Yes, yes, I know. It's the house. How in thunder am I going to raise the wind to rebuild?"

"Wasn't it insured?"

"No. More fool I! The mill is. I was always worrying about fire over there. On account of the men, you know. I've given positive orders that no one is to smoke on the place. It isn't safe, of course, with all that inflammable stuff, straw and paper around. But they will do it. I've fired three men for carrying lighted pipes. But somehow I never thought it worth while to have the house insured. We're careful people. There hasn't been a house burned in Manorton in the memory of man. But I was an awful fool not to carry a moderate insurance, just the same."

"Joe, you really mustn't talk so much," Mrs. Haselton said anxiously.

"All right, old lady, I won't——" He tried to smile reassuringly.

"Don't let him, William," Annie bade, as she left the room.

"If only I could pull out of this confounded bed and see just where I stand!" groaned Joe.

"Don't take the situation too seriously," William said cheerfully. "Don't forget that your friends stand ready to help you. Call on me whenever you like for whatever you need. I know you. You're a first-rate investment."

The worry in Joe's eyes lessened.

"You're weak still and that's why you despond.



As soon as your strength comes back things will begin to look brighter. You'll see."

"Annie tells me most of our furniture was saved." Already Joe spoke with more cheer.

"You'll be back there, all caught up, in a few months," William prophesied.

Joe held out his hand. "William, you've done me lots of good. Now go along and find Sally."

He went to her confidently in a gladness of heart which no sympathy with other people's woes could blight. Very present with him was the feeling of her warm palpitating body clasped in his arms, the delightful sense of her frank reliance on him. Almost he was inclined to bless the catastrophe which had scorched away mists of constraint. It seemed to him that in the chill autumnal night they had come very close together.

"Good morning, William." He felt her tone repellant. As he took her hand his manner changed, sobered. "Are you well? You look—tired." His look begged explanation of the change that had come over her, but she gave none.

"Yes, I'm quite well, thank you." She was baffling, inscrutable. Her eyes, usually so straightforward, refused to meet his.

Perplexedly enough William perceived that they were at cross purposes. How could he come to her, thought Sally, smiling and cheerful, as though what had happened were of no moment?

She could say none of the things prepared for his hearing. They lay ready in her heart, a



heavy load, but she knew her tongue could never utter them. Perhaps he would know something of what she felt without telling. Wistfully she longed for him to be understanding. She had none of her usual light, bright defiance. He felt the effort with which she talked, grew oppressed by the same burden. Then as they talked on in the dreary pretence of commonplace, she felt his subtle sympathy enveloping her. He too, had divinations. William did not understand her mood. How should he? But since it was her mood, he sought to respect it. He would say nothing, do nothing, to augment her disquiet of spirit. Never mind what ailed her. The craving for explanation, for self-justification, left her in a measure under the influence of his tender look and tone. The tenderness was all there. She felt it in the commonplace discussion. Gradually she relaxed, her figure grew less tense. She leaned more easily against her cushioned chair, smiled more freely. Let her make him and herself uncomfortable if she would. She was still Sally—dear, troublesome, necessary Sally.

“What is the matter, Sally? What’s wrong?” he asked. Sally drew back from his gesture of approach.

“Nothing. What should be the matter?” she smiled determinedly. “Unless Mrs. Allan’s blue silk dress is still haunting me. It’s hung like a pall over my spirits all day. You see, first she wanted it tucked, and then she didn’t want it



tucked, and now that it's all cut and fitted otherwise, she's sure she wants it tucked. I've toiled and moiled over the dress until the silk and I are both pretty nearly worn out. So if I seem plunged in gloom you'll know why." She spoke brightly and lightly and insincerely.

"You should have refused to do it." William spoke with a masculine decision that somehow made Sally want to laugh. "There is no reason in the world why you should be the slave of a foolish old woman's whimsies. Why do you submit to her?"

"Bread and butter consideration possibly. Oh, old Mrs. Allan isn't any worse than lots of others after all. Every woman in the world is more or less unreasonable toward her dressmaker. You see, every woman nurses an ideal of herself at a possible best, the way she might look if fates and dressmakers did their very best for her. That's the way she wants to look all the time and does only now and then. The chronic disappointment of falling short of that ideal, she usually visits on the dressmaker."

"That's rather hard on the dressmaker." He was so glad to have the gloom lifted. He watched her brightening face intently. His eyes were full of tenderness. It was so hard not to tell her again all that she had forbidden him to tell her. He longed for her more every day. He had learned that up to a certain point he might be lovelly. She drew the line with feminine incon-



sequence, but she made him observe it. When he encroached, her spirits took alarm, grew distant, elusive.

"I'm afraid it will be some time before I see you again," he said presently. "I'm going away to-morrow."

"Going away?" She was unconscious of the swift change in her face, though she felt the muscles grow rigid. William's announcement was another stab in a sensitive spot. "Do you expect to be gone long?" She was glad to have her voice sound so cool and clear.

"About three weeks, I suppose. It's my annual business trip, you know. I've put it off this year later than I ever did before." He looked at her intently. "It's seemed more difficult than usual to get away. I haven't felt a bit like going." He tried in vain to read the expression of her downcast face. "I've put off going and drifted along from day to day because it's been so much pleasanter to come down here and be with you than to do anything else."

It hurt him to feel her manner stiffen sensitively, as though to warn him that he must not say more.

His puzzled scrutiny assailed her composure. She felt injured as though William were doing her a wrong in going away. In vain her mind realized the feeling as absurd. What business had she to feel that way? Even husbands and wives, the most devoted, had to endure little separations and did so as a matter of course with



cheerful fortitude. Ah, but in the case of the happily married there was that element of certainty which in her case was lacking. She recognized herself as utterly unreasonable.

As William's gaze continued to rest on her inquiringly, she knew that she must be looking rigid, unnatural. Did William think her behaving oddly? He had become very quiet.

The silence was not one of ease. Not long since those moments of nearness which neither could ever forget, and now again they were miles apart. How could such changes be? Surely the gods made game of them. Sally leaned back in her corner of the sofa as though she were very tired. Her womanly pride had snapped and she no longer cared whether William perceived that she was unhappy. She felt no prompting to break the dreary pause.

William rose. She felt that to have him go like this would add the final drop to her cup of bitterness, but she did not stir from her listless position. He must go or stay as he would. All magnetic power to influence him seemed to have gone from her. With a great effort she gathered together the rags and tags of her self-respect to bid him good-bye with dignity. She rose out of courtesy, since William appeared to be going.

But he did not go. Instead he stood there looking at her with strange upbraiding. She trembled under his look, recoiled before his onset as he came closer. Fiercely, almost as though he



could have found it in his heart to hurt her, William caught her in his arms. He paid no heed to her resistance as he pressed hard hot long kisses on her brow, her cheeks, her lips. He would not give over kissing her. At first it filled her with mad joy to know herself still able to dominate his self-control. Then, resistance, anger, woke within her.

"Let me go! Let me go!"

"You are mine! You have no right to keep on denying," he whispered hotly.

"Let me go!" Her spirit was resisting him with all its might, felt his kisses, fierce, unmerciful.

At last William yielded to her vehemence and let her tear herself from his arms. Shaken, exhausted, she leaned against the table, sobbing out in a heartbroken fashion.

"Haven't you a shred of respect left for me? Oh, I know it's all my own fault! I know I've brought this on myself."

Anger blazed in her eyes with bitterest self-scorn.

"Sally, dearest!" He laid his arm about her entreatingly, but she flung it off.

"Oh, this is too much! Haven't you degraded me enough in my own eyes?"

"Don't talk that way. Don't trifle any longer with yourself and me. Come to me, Sally."

She flung back her dishevelled hair. "Renounce all concern for right and wrong? Do what I told you I'd rather die than do? Condone? Go about my own happiness as though nothing else mattered, and forget her unhappiness?"



Before his significant look, her eyes fell. "Love is stronger than reasonings. Don't reason any more."

"She loved you too. She does still."

Until this moment he had never known Sally. All restraints she flung recklessly to the winds—pride, feminine reticence. "I don't know whether I love you or hate you! I tell you I don't know. You've made me suffer so." She flung the accusation at him. She sobbed unrestrainedly. "Why didn't you keep away and leave me to live my life out in my own way. I was doing it. I wasn't so very happy, but it was well enough."

"I love you."

She did not appear to hear him. "Won't you please go away now? I can't bear any more."

"I love you."

"Oh, William, please go. Won't you go?" she said gaspingly.

"I love you."

Did she waver under the reiteration? Suddenly she flung herself upon him. He felt her arms close around his neck, her face warm against his. He felt her kisses passionate, abandoned. "That's the end."

Before he could stay her, she had fled from the room.



## CHAPTER XXII

### THE OLD HAY BARN

A GREAT hay barn stood on a hillside about half a mile from Manorton. It belonged to a Haselton, an uncle of Joe's and Sally's. In old days they had often played there with other village children. Its dim, clean spaces were good to race across, its dusky recesses were made for hide and seek. The old barn was associated with a period of joyous rollicking. No livestock was kept there. In the summer it stood empty or nearly so, for as the years went by, it became a house of refuge for all manner of drifts and strays from the Haselton farm. Tucked about the edges of the wide floor stood a disabled cutter, an obsolete fanning machine, boxes, barrels, rusty leathers, nondescript bits of farm machinery. On either side were ample bags for hay and oats. Up in the lofts, constructed of loose crossbeams and planks, cornstalks were stored, and sometimes rye straw waited there until Joe Haselton offered an acceptable price for it.

The old barn was a pleasant place. It har-



bored a happy community of little live things. The unscrupulous wild folk of the field had appropriated it to their use. Red squirrels garnered their hoards under its roof. Gray field mice nested in the cornstalks. They moved about with gentle rustlings, attending to the wants of their families. Little shrill cries punctuated the prevailing silence. Communities of swallows dwelt up under the faraway old roof. Their mud homes were plastered up against the rafters, near the little square window at the gable and through which the sun, like a twinkling eye, looked down upon the peaceful, dim interior.

Here one day, as several times before, came William and Sally to escape from the interrupting confusion of Millie Stetson's overflowing house.

It seemed to them that a fine impersonal peace reigned in the old barn set in the quiet fields. All the color tones were subdued, time-mellowed. Dull browns and grays predominated. The hay lay low in the mow, a soft, faintly fragrant mass of amber, blended with pale green. Pale bars of gold fell through the knot holes, slanted across the hay, across the floor.

William rolled back the big rear door, which was high up from the sloping meadow on which the barn stood. The square opening framed a lovely prospect of fields and woods, level stretches, and uplands, all gradually warming into color. Here and there the sinuous Manorton Creek flashed a gleam of silver. Along the Creek the



gold of the willow stems was strengthening. The tree buds were beginning to throw back their winter blankets. The tops of the maples looked ruddy. On all sides they saw the dawning flush of spring-time faint still yet exquisitely lovely in promise.

Then the great sadness that sometimes comes with spring, fell upon William and Sally. The whole world seemed filled with tremulous desire, with a burden of vain longings, a painful groping toward self-expression. Sally forced back tears that sought to rise. She turned her head that William might not see the quiver of her lips and felt dismayed at her own unaccountable emotion. A bluebird flashed across the doorway like a bit of summer sky. It, too, was in quest. Quest of what? The grasses knew and the birds and the little gray mice in the rustling cornstalks. Happy wild things, going unquestioningly, single-heartedly, in obedience to the call. Envidable wild things, much wiser in their simplicity than men and women. Only men and women had so befogged their instincts with reasonings that they no longer recognized the call. They wandered unhappily along sidetracks of their own blazing, instead of going confidently along the great high road.

Silence lay upon William and Sally but it was not oppressive. They rested in the sense of each other's nearness, heedless of past and present. A breeze ran over last year's grasses making them nod and dance, the merry grasses. With a look that caressed her, William noted her. She had



lost her expression of calmly confident girlhood. Under stress of emotions new to her she was growing thin and tense. The change in a fine spiritual way was making her beautiful. If her contours were less rounded, her eyes less frank and glad, she was more lovely than she had ever been. Wistful humility instead of certainty peeped from her saddened eyes.

Very curious to each was the feeling that he, that she, was constantly in a subtle, speechless way, questioning the other. They had known each other so long. Time had been when they confidently believed that they understood each other. That was in the long ago easy time of their crude acceptances of faiths made ready by the traditions in which they had been reared. Faiths to which now they could never return. Nothing could ever be more interesting than this problem which each held out for the other's solving. It allured, it challenged, it baffled. They knew that they were playing a fine and vivid game. The times between, when the game was not in progress, were dull and savorless. They came to it eagerly, always, sometimes with a kind of joyous alacrity, sometimes with a kind of terror at the possible outcome. But whatever the outcome, life had gained in significance. They were of the initiated.

"But I never knew," she said often to herself, "I never knew life was like this." She had been but a dull child accepting what was told her.



Now she was beginning to prove for herself. Throughout the game ran a quiver of pain. It gave her a charm that she had never before possessed, the allure of mystery. She was less simple and far more interesting. Wistfulness enveloped her. The people about her perceived vaguely something of Sally's struggle and that a change had come over her. There were moments when she was heartsick, yet with a resolute step and a look of suffering bewilderment, she went her way valiantly. No preoccupation was allowed to interfere with her work. But often she felt as though she were walking in a dream and as though her only waking moments were those spent with William Van Besten. So great a need as this for his presence her nature until now had never known. She knew now how ignorant had been that easy renunciation of him which she had declared that fall day at the Deep Hole. Only a few months had elapsed, yet that day seemed far back in the time of unrealized things.

There was something delightfully hospitable in the atmosphere of the old barn. The deep slants of roof came down on either side in so protecting a fashion. Mellow shadows lay under the deep eaves. A bar of gold fell across Sally's pretty hair. There was something child-like in her position as she sat on the edge of the haymow leaning up against the big square beam. In spite of its fresh color, her face against the warm brown background looked strangely weary. Her hands



lay listlessly in her lap. A womanly patience was fast replacing her old almost boyish alertness.

William felt the change in her. He kept drawing nearer. The field mice and the squirrels went unheeding about their own concerns. What did they care for the joy or the anguish or the self-tormentings of a man and a woman? The man and the woman fell under the spell of the old barn. Nature, great potent teacher, taught them her lesson. The moment was ripe that had long been in preparation.

She felt his approach but she did not move. She did not hold him off. No fight was left in her. Not that the will to do right was lost or lessened. Only, what was right? Living was so much less simple than in her unawakened days she had believed. William leaned over her. His strong lips looked flushed. She felt them coming nearer and nearer, and her own lips trembled. Troubled eyes looked into troubled eyes, questioning, pleading, demanding as of right. "Sally!" William whispered huskily. "Sally!" His arms went around her.

A high desire throbbed within her to be good to this man, to be to him all that he would have her. She could not feel the desire mean or base or wronging another. Nature, dominant in the old barn, gently swept away all perplexities, all subterfuges. The course lay straight and clear at last, undeniably so because irresistible. Very feebly her appealing hands sought to hold him off,



then desisted from the futile, unmeaning effort. The way she pressed him from her urged him to draw near. There was no denying the urgency of the summons.

In his thick, smooth hair she noticed a few strands of gray. With difficulty she refrained from laying her hand on them. William was too young to have gray hairs yet. She noticed the perpendicular furrows forming between his eyes, and longed to make life so pleasant to him that he would no longer feel inclined to frown. She felt that she could do much toward that. How strong his hand felt, the long, shapely hand that overlay her own, held in happy captivity. Sally drew a long breath—not a sigh of unhappiness, but of relief, a tired letting go of perplexities. Here she and William were, shut in by themselves. For the moment that was enough.

Time did not matter. Neither thought of time as they sat there. He held her in his arms. She rested willingly against his breast. Why could not the moment last! She longed for it to last. She did not want to puzzle, to reason any more. The spring pulse in all animate things coursed through their veins. William's spirit seemed to look out at her like flame dancing behind veils of mist. All subterfuge fell away from her as the woman's spirit answered. She went willingly into the compelling arms yearning to receive her. The spring sunlight rayed them with gold. The great wise beneficent spirit of harvests past and to come smiled on them.



## CHAPTER XXIII

### IN KIRTON SOCIETY

EVERY day after the early dinner, Sally sat with Joe in his bed-room for a little while. She and Annie had agreed that Joe must be cheered in every possible way. He had pain to endure and, worse than pain, foreboding worry over the family loss, restive rebellion against captivity when he longed to be doing.

As she retailed bits of gossip gleaned from her customers or allowed her ready tongue unscrupulously to turn the ways of those good ladies into ridicule for Joe's amusement, Sally sometimes wondered if her heart were not heavier than his, if truth were known. There must be something of relief in making one's wail audible.

She thought of those gray dawn hours when she went over and over and over what had been. Hours which made her heart beat fast and she clasped her pillow fiercely, thinking that she might be very wicked not to repent, but sure, quite sure, that she did not repent. She set her soft lips together, much as William Van Besten



often set his lips, and defied desolation if it came. Emotions, misgivings, strange thrills of exultation tore her, pulled her spirit this way and that, until she felt tired and bruised and passive. She suffered, yet all the time she hugged her pain and would not willingly have lost it in oblivion of all that it had brought with it.

Little Joe frolicked about his father on the bed, believing it a special privilege to be admitted to the sick-room. How should he suspect that his plotting mother had pressed him too into the service, and that he was expected to be a little missionary of cheer to his pale and languid father?

"Oh, baby, don't be so rough with poor father," Mrs. Haselton expostulated.

Sally looked on wistfully. Good, loving, and loyal to her, the family were yet complete without her. Loneliness enveloped her like a fog. She jumped up. "Well, I must go back to my sewing."

"Seems to me Sally looks rather fagged," Joseph Haselton commented uneasily, when she had left the room.

"Yes, Sally is thin," Mrs. Haselton agreed. "But we'll soon be in our own house again, and then she'll pick up. It's been a hard winter for her, too."

"She's been a little brick, all right," her brother said heartily.

"Come, Joe, it's time for your nap." With a practised hand Mrs. Haselton arranged the pillows.



When Joe had stretched himself at full length she tucked in the bedclothes snugly, smiling at him cheerfully the while. Not for much would she have had him divine the pang with which she realized afresh how weak and white he still was.

"And what are you going to do, old lady?" he asked.

"I'm going to take the baby and do some errands that I've been wanting to accomplish this long time."

"That's right. Now that I'm so much better you ought to get out every day. I want you to, Annie." But he still clung to her hand, reluctant to relinquish the tender prop. Obeying the invitation in his eyes, his wife bent down and kissed him before she went away.

When she returned an hour or so later, she sought her sister-in-law.

"Sally, where are you?" Mrs. Haselton called softly, mindful that Joe might still be napping. Sally, looking up at the call, thought the walk had done Annie good. Her cheeks were brighter than they had been of late. Her eyes were animated. She crossed the room swiftly and bending over, laid her cheek caressingly against Sally's. "You oughtn't to have done it, dear. It's too much for you to do."

"What in the world are you talking about?" But although she questioned, Sally's face was conscious.

"I've been so worried about the doctor's bill,"



Mrs. Haselton said. "I knew it was worrying Joe. There was all we've had these last months and little Joe's scarlatina."

"The doctor was perfectly willing to wait," Sally said shortly.

"I know he was, but it's bothered me a lot. Joe's always hated so to let any bill run on. I stopped in at the Doctor's to have a little private talk about Joe, and I mentioned the bill. He said there wasn't any bill to amount to anything. He said you'd paid it."

"I didn't want to have that hanging over our heads any longer." Sally threaded her needle with an air of concentration as though dismissing a matter of small import.

"I couldn't begin to thank you," Mrs. Haselton said earnestly. "Joe was just saying how splendid you'd been. It's awfully generous of you. When he's all right again he'll see that you get this back."

"No he won't. I won't let him," his sister said. Somehow Annie's frank loving gratitude made her feel like a hypocrite. She might shower loving kindnesses upon these dear people, but in her heart she recognized an inner alienation. Her heart went out to them in a very passion of service just because they no longer sufficed her. That was why, in spite of all she could do for them, she felt such aching sense of disloyalty.

It seemed to her that for many days now the people among whom her life was cast, her nearest and dearest, had become as shadows moving on



the outside of her intimate drama. Then compunction seized her for what seemed like fickleness toward them. She did not understand her own moods, but she knew that serenity was gone. "I'm so restless, so terribly restless," she moaned to herself in self-pity.

"Dear William, I am going up to Kirton on Tuesday to stay overnight with the McKinstrys. Perhaps I may see you there. Ada McKinstry tells me that she has sent you a card for their little company on Tuesday evening." William straightened out the nonchalant little note, read it over and over. Somehow it hurt him that it should be so curt and business-like. In vain he sought between the lines any hint of warmth, of tenderness, of Sally's self. Finally he thrust the note back in its envelope and put it away in his pocket. He had forgotten about the McKinstry's card until this reminder. The social affairs of Kirton seldom interested him. Maids and matrons frequently tried in vain to persuade him to augment the scanty sprinkling of men at Kirton parties. But he would go to the McKinstrys. Sally must know how ardently he longed to see her, how difficult it was at times to allow two, three, four days to elapse between his visits to Manorton. Tuesday, that was to-day, he would see Sally then this evening. Involuntarily his eyes sparkled, his lips smiled. Gladness thrilled through him. It would be oddly interesting to observe Sally against a background of Kirton



people. She had none of their stereotyped ways.

"You dear thing, I'm so glad you've come." Ada McKinstry welcomed Sally with effusive overpowering cordiality. Miss McKinstry was a big blond young woman with an excess of animation. Her mother gave Sally cordial but quieter welcome. Mrs. McKinstry, like her daughter, was big and blonde, but the fairness and brightness of her tints had long been dimmed. From her vantage point of some fifty years she surveyed the younger generation with critical reservations.

"My dear, what has become of your rosy cheeks," she said. "You look rather pale."

"Come upstairs, Sally. I've a thousand things to tell you. Is Mr. Van Besten coming to-night?" Miss McKinstry asked.

"I don't know. I wrote him yesterday that I would be here," Sally answered composedly.

"Of course he'll come then."

It was Sally's own opinion. Her spirits rose. Manorton worries faded away. Uppermost now was the prompting to show herself to William in a new light. She tossed away all recollection which sought to worry. In her dress suit case was her pretty new dress. When she put it on presently she would put on at the same time a new mental attitude. She would be her old independent, self-governing self, as he should recognize. The McKinstry family enveloped her with hospitable attentions and found her gay and charming.



By the time the guests began to come in the evening a becoming bloom had returned to Sally's cheeks. She carefully concealed her expectancy but she was watchful for William's appearance and saw him as he paused on the threshold, looking remarkably tall and dignified in his correct evening dress. As Sally went forward to greet him, she felt Ada McKinstry's interested gaze, and Walker McKinstry's too.

"How do you do, William. I'm so glad you could come."

Her sweeping robe gave her stateliness. She was bright-eyed and lovely to look at in her white lace dress, and subtly different from the hard-working Sally of home.

William came forward eagerly with a look that was for her alone, but her breezy self-possession held him off. His bow was ceremonious. Their hands touched formally, then fell apart as other acquaintances claimed her attention. William Van Besten stood in dreary boredom watching her from afar. One potent factor in his discontent was the uneasy sense of social unfitness. With mortification he perceived himself to be chronically bankrupt in the necessary small change of conversation, unable to respond in kind to banter, gay trifling. He declined joining the coterie of bridge players in the library. The stack of foreign photographs, Mr. McKinstry's collection of puzzles, the various traps for entertainment which the McKinstrys had set for their guests



failed to allure, nor did it occur to the young merchant to pretend that they did.

"How well Sally looks to-night." Miss McKinstry was beside him, hospitably intent on thawing her stiff-mannered guest into affability. "I tell her she ought to wear white all the time. She has such a lovely color."

Mr. Van Besten glanced at Sally unresponsively. The subject did not appear to interest him. Miss McKinstry conducted him to a lonely lady sitting on a sofa and left the two to struggle with each other.

William Van Besten rallied his courtesy to listen, to respond. Across the room Sally was gaily laughing and talking. Her many Kirton acquaintances made much of her.

William felt her easy give and take in flattering contrast to his own constraint. Sally certainly possessed the social gift in which he was lacking. Nor did it look like an artificial trick. Sally's great charm had always been her naturalness. A delightful instinct of friendliness saved her straightforwardness from becoming harsh or brusque. With that she was piquante, no mush of amiability. Sally could deal stout blows upon occasion, sometimes with a laugh, sometimes with a frown. But then, if she felt that the blow had been unmerited, or if she saw that it hurt, she was so eagerly, generously anxious to atone, to appease the hurt.

It seemed to the man watching her that she



possessed an alluring, independent grace which none of the others there possessed. The other women were pretty enough, pleasant enough, but her vivid personality stood out against their personalities as against a dull monotone of background. William Van Besten noticed other eyes than his own rest admiringly upon her.

With a somewhat humbled mien, he finally joined the group about her. As she smiled up at him with a kind of airy challenge, he seemed to feel her spirit defying his, saying: "You see, you are not all important after all. I have other friends, other interests." Her hazel eyes glowed. Sally was finding her little social success exhilarating.

"How long are you going to be up here, Sally?" His constrained voice sounded as though he were secretly reproaching her for being here in her pretty new dress having such a good time. He felt himself that his betrayal of dissatisfaction was ridiculous.

Sally brightened mischievously. She looked joyously elate as he had not seen her look for a long time.

"I have to go back to-morrow afternoon."

"I'll see you to-morrow." He spoke eagerly. She found herself breathing more quickly under his look. With all her might she strove to maintain a superficial tone. "What are you going to do in the morning? Will you take a drive?"

"I can't, William, thank you." She hesitated,



then laughed out gaily. "I think it's more than likely that I'll make you a call in the morning. Ada and I are going shopping. I've quantities of things to buy for quantities of people. William, have you ever realized what an excellent customer you have in me?"

But William was in no mood to be cajoled into gaiety. "Will you and Miss McKinstry lunch with me?"

She looked brightly apologetic. "Why we can't, William. Walker is going to take us out to the Country Club for lunch."

William's face grew cloudier. "Will you let me drive you down to Manorton in the afternoon?" he asked, in rather a low voice.

She gave him a deprecating shake of the head.

"That's awfully good of you, William." She hesitated, wanting to be kind, willing now that he should see her compunction at the series of petty rebuffs she was administering. "But—Walker's going to drive me down." Instantly William seemed to incase himself in a glacial neutrality toward her and all the world. "You see, it was all arranged when I came up that he should drive me down," she added hurriedly, watching his face. "Walker hasn't been to Manorton for ever so long. He thought he'd like to see the place again." She knew uneasily that her explanatory tone was wasted.

"Yes?" he said, in a cool, hard tone. "Well, I hope you'll enjoy your visit. Sorry there's



nothing I can do for you." He glanced casually around him. "This is really a most attractive house, isn't it? I don't think I've been here since Mr. McKinstry remodelled it. It's certainly greatly improved." She felt him suddenly remote, impenetrable, and could not bear to have him so. In her impulsive fashion she stepped closer. "William, I'm awfully sorry. If I hadn't promised Walker I'd love to have you take me." Her kind, bright eyes pleaded with him to understand.

"Very good of you." William's face remained hard and grim. "I'll say good-night now."

"But you'll be down on Friday? Joe said you were coming."

"Yes. Joe wants to discuss some business matters with me." His tone might have issued from a talking machine, it was so void of warmth.

"Until Friday then." She offered him her hand.

William touched it grudgingly. "Good evening, Sally."

"I hope our quiet little party wasn't too much for you, Sally," Mrs. McKinstry said next morning at the breakfast table. The speech conveyed reproach to Sally. She felt that she was not playing the rôle of guest as successfully this morning as she had yesterday. Abstraction lay in wait for her. She roused herself. "Oh, no indeed, Mrs. McKinstry, your party was delightful."

"Now we've caught you we're never going to let you go home this afternoon," Ada McKinstry threatened hospitably.



"Do stay with us a little longer," urged Walker. "I'll tell you what we'll do if you'll stay."

His insistent inducements sounded tiresome in Sally's ears. Walker meant well, but what an utterly common-place being he was. Her heart sank at the thought of the eight miles drive tête-a-tête. Was it worth while to have irritated William for the sake of this good-natured numskull? In spite of the diversions planned for her entertainment the day stretched drearily ahead of her. "I wish, I wish I hadn't come." She gave a start and glanced at the placid faces of the McKinstrys. She had thought the wish so intensely that it seemed to her it must have been audible. She had hoped the whiff of a different atmosphere, a little pleasuring, would bring back something which she had missed in herself of late, matter of course ease of mind. Life had grown so unrestful, even its joyous moments quivered with uncertainties. Her spirit felt fatigued with its own fluctuations, its own misgivings. Judge McKinstry and Walker went away to their offices. Mrs. McKinstry disappeared in the kitchen regions, intent upon housekeeping. Ada, too, had a few tasks to accomplish before she and Sally set forth to shop. There was ample entertainment in the comfortable sitting-room, with its open fire, the society of a cat and a dog, abundance of books and magazines. As a pretence for doing nothing unassailed, she opened a magazine. She was glad to have Mrs. McKinstry and Ada leave her to



herself for a little while, glad to be free to stare moodily into the fire, careless whether she looked as dissatisfied as she felt.

The doorbell rang. The maid went to answer it. When she opened the sitting-room door Mrs. Van Besten was apparently reading in great comfort, her feet on the fender. "If you please, ma'am, there's a lady would like to see you."

"Who is it, Bridget?"

"Here's her card, ma'am."

Sally took the card and read the name engraved upon it. It brought a flush, a singular look to her face. Bridget made a clumsy shuffle to remind that she was still waiting. Mrs. Van Besten was unmindful of Bridget, as holding her head erect with the manner of one on guard against unknown possibilities, she sought her caller in the parlor.

"You wish to see me?"

The woman standing there waiting for her looked her over from head to foot. Her own graceful figure, a little too attenuated at present, had perhaps more grace, made more poetic appeal. Sally's possessed just the charm of vigor and good proportion, frank, unsubtle. In the woman's dark eyes burned unhappy passion goading her to action for which later on she would weep with shame. To-day she cared for no shame. All that she knew was that she could no longer bear to feel herself of no account, dropped out of consideration, like the faded, breeze-scattered petals of a flower once lovely, once prized. She



wanted to hurt the woman who had robbed her. In saner moments she reasoned wisely, admitted to herself the bitter truth that it was she who was the thief, the interloper. Then hopeless, unappeasable longing swept her away on a current she could not stem. Still it was less hate than unutterable pain that Sally saw in the dark anguished eyes.

"You wish to see me?" she asked again, and this time her voice sounded less challenging.

"If you please. You are Mrs. Van Besten, I believe?"

"Yes."

"I have something here that may interest you." Her nervous hand drew a sheaf of notes from a small bag. She held it out defiantly. "I meant to destroy them but I thought it fair to myself that you should have them. Why should I be the only one to suffer? You might as well know what manner of man William Van Besten is."

As she accepted the letters Sally recognized the writing on the uppermost envelope. She divined what she held in her hand.

"Are you sure you want me to read these letters?" she asked, searchingly.

"Yes, of course. Why else should I have brought them?" It was apparent that she was doing violence to her own delicacy, her own instincts; was in wild revolt against herself.

The two women stood studying each other. In the suffering defeated expression Sally recognized a reflection of much that she herself had learned



to know. The arrogance that had risen within her to greet her visitor, her scorn of her for coming, were suddenly swept away in a mighty impulse of compassion.

"I don't need to read these letters." Her voice sounded low and strange.

"You know? Then he has told you?" Shame burned in the delicate tortured face. "He might have spared me that humiliation. It was base of him to tell."

"He thought he ought to tell me." The other drew herself up proudly. They looked at each other in a kind of helpless entanglement, not knowing what to do, what to say. Then Sally spoke:

"You are awfully unhappy. I'm not angry. I know it's because you're so unhappy that you came. I understand." Sally almost whispered the words. "I'm not very happy myself." Her voice quivered. "You needn't envy me. I'm trying to do right, but it's very hard. I don't know—I don't blame you any more——"

Neither knew how it happened. They were clasping hands, looking at each other with softened faces, with quivering lips. Not antagonists—two puzzled, heart-sick women.

"These letters," Sally said presently, looking down on them. "Whatever is in them was sincerely written, was written for you. Nothing can undo that, take that truth away from you. They are between you and him. Let's leave it



so for all time. Shall we?" Sally spoke tenderly, as though she would protect the other from herself. "But the sight of them will always make you suffer. They have become poisonous to you. It will be best to have them out of the world." Sally glanced toward the fire on the hearth with a world of suggestion. She put the little package back in her visitor's hand. The other wavered for an instant and Sally feared for her decision, felt anxiety pulse at her heart. Then the other crossed the room, leaned over, thrust the letters down between two logs into a red-hot bed of coals. But the compact bunch was slow in kindling. It seemed a long time before it caught, smoked, blackened, a clear bright flame burnt up between the logs. The women stood waiting in silence until a few crumbling flakes were all that was left of the letters. With an instinct of compassion, Sally refrained from looking at her visitor's face. The latter was the first to speak. "I must go. I ought never to have come of course. But I shan't try to explain or apologize. Good morning, Mrs. Van Besten." She hesitated, then turned in her swift, graceful way.

Sally stepped swiftly to intercept her passage to the door. "Don't hate me. Please don't hate me," she entreated in a low, moved way.

The other paused. She, too, was tense and white with the emotion of the interview. She seemed to be struggling with herself, obeying some evil, singular prompting to recall the hate and



malice she had brought with her. But looking into the other's face all kindled with comprehension, with nothing of the scorn, the accusation, the reproach she had expected to find, but instead only a kind of sad appeal, as though they two were fellow sufferers, the steel clutch relaxed. "Why, I don't hate you," she said, in a slow, bewildered way. The other's expression still held her fascinated gaze. "I thought I did, but I don't." They gave each other another long puzzled look and then, without another word, she went away.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### FINAL CERTAINTIES. CONCLUSION

A HORRID persistent gnaw of misgiving was Sally's portion to-day. It made shopping a dreary business, void of interest. It destroyed all possibility of pleasure in the excursion to the Country Club which Walker McKinstry had arranged with lavish, anxious desire to do her honor. Ever since they were boy and girl, Walker McKinstry had admired Sally Haselton in a faithful, futile way. Sally did her best not to disappoint him. She walked at his side, feeling very much as though she was in a tedious dream, trying to respond, trying to admire, and secretly longing for this wretched day to end. That long drive down to Manorton with Walker loomed ahead of her, a prospect of horror. It seemed impossible to go with him now, leaving William Van Besten misunderstanding and alienated. Manorton and Kirton seemed farther apart than ever they had done before. She wished the tedious hours away, yet dreaded the arrival of the moment of departure.



Walker, foolishly elated at the pleasure in store for him, made continual reference to their drive. Sally found his continual reminder irritating.

"What time will you be ready, Sally? I think perhaps we ought to start about four."

"Very well, Walker, I'll be ready," Sally said reluctantly. Lazily she went upstairs to pack. Meantime Ada McKinstry sat chatting with her friend. "I'm so glad you came up, Sally. We've enjoyed your visit ever so much. I only wish you could have stayed over another day," she said hospitably.

Somewhere downstairs a clock struck four musical beats. Sally glanced out of the window and saw Walker driving toward the house. Her dismay strengthened. But her travelling case was packed. Her hat and jacket lay ready to be donned.

"It's too bad you can't stay longer," Miss McKinstry repeated.

Sally flushed a little as she turned away from the window. "I don't suppose it will make any great difference if I don't get back until tomorrow."

Miss McKinstry regarded her with genuine surprise. Then she recollected herself. "Do you mean that you will stay? Why, that's very nice of you, Sally." Somehow her hospitality seemed less spontaneous. The guest divined that the change of plan was a trifle disconcerting, yet felt shamelessly relieved to have postponed departure.



Ada ran downstairs and opened the door to her brother. "Walker, Sally's not going after all."

"Not going! What do you mean?"

Sally looked and felt shamefaced as she followed Ada downstairs. "You see, you've treated me altogether too well." Her little laugh was apologetic. "I can't tear myself away from this kind family." Sally tried to speak lightly. "I told Ada that I thought home could get along very well without me for one more day. Walker, I hope you aren't perfectly disgusted with me for being so changeable."

"That's all right, of course, Sally. I'm delighted to have you stay." But he looked almost humorously disappointed. "Well, I might as well go and put out my horse."

For a few minutes Sally was alone. "Mother, Sally's decided to stay until to-morrow." Sally overheard the announcement.

"Has she?" Mrs. McKinstry answered in great surprise. "Why I thought she said she had to get back."

Ada made no answer.

"Then, Ada, we'd better not try to can those strawberries until to-morrow. I was going to do them this afternoon." The listener perceived a tinge of regret in Mrs. McKinstry's voice and felt a pang of discomfort to have become an interruption. Nevertheless, she felt defiantly glad that she was not at this moment driving away from Kirton with Walker McKinstry. This pro-



longation of her visit to an anti-climax could not be helped. She had been impelled to remain.

Surely time never before dragged so leaden-weighted. In sickness of spirit Sally endured the tedious hours. If she had carried out her first intention, she would have been home now. The thought of home, of Joe's and Annie's matter-of-fact kindliness, of little Joe's boisterous welcome had become strangely distasteful. All the savor had gone out of her usual daily existence. The distance between Manorton and Kirton stretched interminably.

After supper Judge McKinstry, with courteous excuse to the guest, summoned his son to the library for a business parley. Miss McKinstry was called to the parlor to see a young woman protégé, come for help and advice. Mrs. McKinstry, anxious housewife always, had but divided attention to offer Sally Van Besten. "My dear, if you don't mind being left to yourself for a little while I think I'd better go and speak to Bridget about breakfast," she said.

Sally assured her that she did not mind. Mind! If they only knew what a relief it was to be left to herself. She stepped softly past the library door behind which she heard Judge McKinstry's heavy voice haranguing Walker, out upon the porch. She stood leaning against a pillar gazing out into the summer night. Strange the aching tenderness she felt toward the woman with whom she had spoken to-day for the first time. She recalled the



delicate features, the dark, beautiful eyes, the quick grace of movement; and very humbly and wistfully believed herself to be possessed of lesser charm. Yet strangely enough it was she, not the other, for whom William cared. An uncontrollable joy bubbled up in her heart as that conviction came home. She drew a long, half-stifled sigh as she closed her eyes the better to summon a sweet, warm revivifying thrill that she had learned to know. Ardently she wished that William knew that she had not gone with Walker. To-morrow would soon be here. Then she really must go. The McKinstrys expected her to go. In opposition to the pull bidding her stay longer she felt convinced that a potent though indefinable pressure would push her off, start her for Manorton to-morrow.

She looked wistfully down the street. She wondered whether William was as disquiet as herself. The day had been a slow torture to her. She dreaded the long night. She was so weary with unhappiness. She glanced guiltily back into the house where the family was absorbed in its own affairs. A steady feminine murmur sounded from the parlor. Just as she was, in her white summer gown, bareheaded, she went quickly down the steps, out into the street. The soft evening air was refreshing. The streets were not lighted to-night. In expectation of moonlight the economical city fathers trusted her serenity to light their city for them. But she did so fitfully.



Soft summer clouds played hide and seek with the moon. For a few minutes all would be lovely and luminous, then all at once the world would be drenched in obscurity, all shadowy and mysterious. Sally felt rather like a shadow herself as she sped along.

She walked more slowly as she neared her destination. The last time she had been to William's house he had accompanied her. They had been so carelessly happy that day. Like two merry children playing at housekeeping. Their fun had seemed so harmless and delightful. Then all at once had struck the knell of their merry comradery. Out of a portion of William's life, of which until that moment she had been ignorant, had emerged a woman who had dispelled laughter. Because of her, life could never again be the easy, the superficial thing it had been. "But when I was a man I put away childish things." It seemed to Sally that from the moment of the woman's coming she herself had been summoned to play with life no longer. Ever since then she knew that she had been glimpsing more and more clearly values until then never suspected. The process had been forced upon her, transforming her, taking her out of her own petty power of direction. She paused at William's gate. The iron fence excluded her grimly, as William's look had done last evening.

William Van Besten sat solitary in his latticed porch, the sweetness drifting over him from



thousands of unseen blossoms, filling him with intolerable longing and restlessness. He did not know how to appease the hungry clamor for something beyond reach, which goaded him to his feet finally and made him take to walking up and down. Surely he was a weakling or he could have forced circumstances to finer issues. He regarded himself with contempt as well as dissatisfaction. Because he was a bungler at living, three people were unhappy. The intermittent moonlight revealed the squat form of speckled toads which hopped out from one dim hiding place after another to enjoy the night air. William watched them moodily. Little grotesque beings capable they seemed of exercising evil enchantments such as lie in wait for men in shadowy places.

He did not hear the front gate opened and light hesitant footsteps on the flagged walk until Sally stood at the porch. Suddenly he knew that he was no longer alone.

"William!"

He had turned toward her before the low call. All that the man possessed, heart and spirit and flesh, called welcome to her as he went eagerly down the steps to meet her.

"You didn't go?"

"No. I—I thought I wouldn't. I came to tell you that I didn't drive down with Walker after all. I didn't want to go with Walker." Trying to smile confidently she looked up at him with a



wavering appeal of which she was unconscious. He answered it instantly.

"I'm very glad you didn't go." He spoke very gently, very deferentially.

With quick relief, Sally felt that just as she had hoped, William would understand. She quite longed to reward him for understanding.

"I thought perhaps, William—if you weren't too busy, that is—perhaps you'd drive me down to-morrow?"

He scarcely knew what she was talking about as he took her hands, her soft, firm, little hands.

"Do you think you can? Of course not if it's inconvenient," she added anxiously.

"It will be convenient, dear." His voice exulted in her coming, filled her with happy confusion.

"Perhaps I oughtn't to have come, but I thought I'd better let you know I was still here. But I must go back in a minute, they'll be wondering what has become of me."

Happily enough she yielded to the gentle compulsion with which William drew her down beside him on the steps.

"William, do you know how you looked at me last night?" she whispered presently. "I couldn't go back home and leave you feeling that way. I couldn't do it."

He lifted her hand to his lips. "Thank you for coming," he answered huskily.

Peace enfolded them. The sweetness of the blossoms had lost its sadness. The faint sleepy



cheeping of birds and insects sounded like little joy bells in the night. Night was drifting softly down upon the waiting earth. William felt little tremors run over Sally as though the night chill struck through her thin dress. He roused himself. "Dearest, I'm afraid it's too cold for you out here. You must come into the house."

"No, I must go," she said uneasily. "I'm not cold." But she yielded to the tender force with which he drew her to her feet.

"You're shivering, dear. You must come into the house." She recognized authority, tender, inflexible care of her to which she yielded with a kind of joy in submission.

William threw open the door and hand in hand they went into the house. As they went through the hall he turned on the gas a little way in the old-time chandelier that hung there. The crystal prisms clashed in a joyous tinkle of welcome. The light from it fell softly into the quiet sitting-room as they turned happy faces toward each other. William drew her toward him. Wonderful to him what the last months had written in her face. They had worn away something of its roundness of contour. They had brought to it a fire and nobility it had not used to possess. Her soul looked out of her eyes at him, made appeal that was even solemn to his manhood.

Touching her with a wonderful regard and tenderness, he ensconced her in a great mahogany chair, one of the treasures of his collection. It



thrilled him to touch her flesh through the sheer, clinging fabric of her gown. She saw him flush and she quivered under his light touch.

Some two hundred years earlier that chair had been the property of a judge famous throughout the State for vigorous perspicacity. Slender and girlish in her white draperies, Sally scarcely filled the judge's chair. William knelt down before his judge and put his arms about her. A low wonderful melody throbbed about them, filled the peaceful room.

Sally drew a long breath. Almost as though his personality were new to her she took note of his square shoulders, his rather rugged features. All his little mannerisms, all his varying expressions had become significant to her. All her womanliness went out to him. With a shy yet intimate gesture, she laid her hand lightly on his thick brown hair. They regarded each other dizzily.

"You must teach me not to be selfish," he said huskily.

The summer night pulsed about them, always more intense. From the flowering shrubs out in the yard countless delicate horns lavishly flung forth nectar. The wonderful sweetness stole through the heavy shutters that guarded man and woman in happy isolation. They breathed it and it helped to quicken the beat of their hearts. A silence, significant and charged with ecstasy, fell over them like a golden chain holding them together as they regarded each other with startled acquiescence.



For so long they had fumbled, doubted, mistrusted the call. Often they had been glad and merry together. Often they had been sad and constrained. Always heretofore they had sought consciously to pull the strings by which their drama was enacted. But at last they had learned that their hands could no longer direct the strings—not hers, soft and feminine, not his, although they were both sensitive and strong. The strings had strengthened to coercive cables. Very wonderfully upon them lay the sense of strength through weakness, a weakness self-recognized at last and content to drift docilely on the great current. He was lonely and wanted her companionship, and she longed to give it to him. He had done wrong and therefore he needed love and forgiveness. The air was aquiver as the night came surely on, taking soft possession of the earth. Sally smiled faintly up at William, a sweet, heart-rending little smile that said many things. They did not know whether the time that passed was to be measured in minutes or hours. Suddenly, as though impelled by a mighty impulse, William rose strongly to his feet. Obedient to the suggestion of his clinging hands, she rose too. His face was flushed. She scarcely knew how to meet the gaze of his suffused blue-gray eyes. She felt his manhood surge about her, and involuntarily closed her own eyes. William's lips throbbed to kiss the white lids and bid them open to reveal all that he had a right to know.



Her breathing grew short and quick. Her face in the soft light from the hall looked whitely luminous. It seemed to him that she swayed toward him as he caught her in his eager, imperious arms. They were conscious of nothing but each other.

They never realized that the quality of the night was gradually changing and the stars no longer punctuated the summer sky and that the teasing clouds had their will of the moon at last, held her swathed in their thick gray veils.

Like one awakening from a trance Sally sought her ancient moorings. "William, let me go." Transformation, swift as the touch of a magician's wand, fell upon her. He saw her grow elusive, then as he continued to look steadily at her he felt her spirit's quick return to him.

"Listen," William said suddenly. Their attention was arrested by a patter of rain that sounded like a low and pleasant croon about the house. Then it came more smartly in a mad, glad pelt against the shutters. The smell of the wet earth pushed into the room, insistent, stronger, more pungent than the flower fragrance that it dispelled.

The last glimmer of twilight had long since faded. All its half revelations, its atmosphere of sweet, tantalizing ambiguities, hidden, fugitive promise of color and sweetness, had been succeeded by the solemn and potent night. The two, so strangely oblivious of passing time, felt the night, the great night enfold them.



They never heeded the slow subsiding of the rain or knew when it stopped. Nor were they aware that the stars were twinkling out once more in the dark velvety blue of the sky. Yet it was a long time before the gold glitter of the stars paled to silver.

The whole earth hung in suspense awaiting the coming change of which these two were oblivious. The gas jets of the old crystal chandelier out in the hall seemed to shine more feebly for knowing that they were about to be eclipsed. The forces of the night were beginning to gather together for withdrawal, and still William and Sally paid no heed. The fair triumphant dawn was advancing slow and stately to inherit the triumphs of the night. She sent her scouts on from afar, faintly luminous heralds of the light she was bringing.

The light in the room changed, became uncertain, interpenetrated with gray.

Although the world still lay in shadow, the little birds knew that dawn would soon be here. One after another joined the chorus of twitter and song, swelling the glad sweet rollicking welcome. Pale uncertain shadows crept through the shutters, crept farther and farther across the floor.

Sally saw the creeping shadows. She drew away from William and hid her face in trembling hands. She gave a great sob.

Tenderly William sought to draw down the screening hands. It hurt him to see her tremble. "Dearest," he whispered. His lips sought hers,



found them, although she tried to turn away, kissed them again, clung to them again. A softened drip fell against the shutters. An intrusive little breeze rioted into the room.

All the spirit seemed to have gone out of proud, self-sufficient Sally. She looked shaken, defeated, her lips drooped pitifully as she leaned back among the cushions. William longed to comfort, to see her look up at him bright and happy. She scarcely heeded his clinging arms, his kisses.

Suddenly from out in the garden came a low sweet call from some waking bird. It penetrated the brooding night.

Sally started forward. Wonder and recollection, glad recollection, transfigured her. "William, I'm your wife."

Her quivering voice made almost a question of the statement.

With an exquisite tenderness that paid her all possible tribute, William's eyes met hers in the same glad recognition. "Yes, dearest, you are my wife."

Sally drew a long sigh of relief. Doubt and shame fled. "Then it's all right. It's all right!" Her hand lay more confidently in his.

"It's all right," William repeated happily.

[THE END.]



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